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BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

A Novel

BY

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'FOLLY MORRISON,' 'HONEST DAVIE,' 'FETTERED FOR LIFE,' ETC.



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BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH.

CHAPTER XVII.

IT came about in this way: Mrs. Redmond would not stir out of the hotel on Sunday because it was ‘bad form,’ in view of the vulgar herd of Saturday-to-Monday visitors, who swarmed everywhere, and made the place unbearable; so Nessa, who was less fastidious, and, indeed, rather preferred to see a lot of people enjoying themselves, to the silent few looking as if their lives were a burden to them, went out alone in the afternoon. She had made up her mind the day before that she must go to the top of those white cliffs,

and see how the waves looked bursting on the rocks below.

She stepped out briskly, and following the Parade, passed the squalid houses and the gas-works, and reached the cliff, where there was nothing before her but the Downs and the sky and the sea. But just as she was beginning to feel that proper sense of awe and solitude which one ought to feel in the grand aspect of Nature, she became conscious that she was being followed by that pest of society —the enamoured young man—who will track unprotected young ladies into solitary places if he can, and make himself disagreeable when he may do so with tolerable immunity.

From the corner of her eye, as she looked over the sea, Nessa perceived that he was youthful and scrubby, with the appearance of a junior clerk or a draper's assistant. She walked on until she felt sure that he was keeping pace with her, and then did what

it is best, perhaps, for a young lady to do in such a situation: she stopped and faced him.

When he took off his very shiny silk hat to her, she looked him calmly in the face, without moving a muscle. She knew the animal and his ways, and was prepared to make him utterly ashamed of himself.

But when, still holding his hat in his hand, he said, very humbly, 'I beg your pardon, Miss Grahame: I have ventured to follow you here because I have something to say to you that I could not say elsewhere,' she perceived that she had done the young man an injustice. She had a faint recollection of having seen this Jewish face before, and the recollection was strengthened by the sound of his voice and his painful embarrassment. His earnestness alarmed her, and she waited, breathless, to know what he had to tell her.

‘ You don’t remember me,’ he continued hurriedly. ‘ Of course you wouldn’t notice anyone so far beneath you ; but I have—have taken the deepest interest in you from the first moment you came into our office, and—and I am proud to think I have already rendered you some service, although I dare say you are not aware of it. My name is Levy, and I am clerk to old—to Mr. Nichols, the money-lender.’

‘ I remember you now. Pray put your hat on, Mr. Levy.’

Nessa would have liked him to wipe the perspiration from his face with the gorgeous handkerchief that displayed a corner from his breast-pocket, and would have felt much easier if he had taken a less servile attitude.

She walked on slowly to give him confidence, and then said :

‘ May I ask how I am indebted to you ?’

‘ Oh, please don’t think you are indebted to me : it’s all the other way. In serving you I have found a pleasure that money couldn’t buy — ’pon my word I have ; and, if you believe me, I should quite glory in it if old Nichols found out what I am at now and told me next Friday that he shouldn’t require my services any more.’

‘ Will you tell me what you *are* at ?’ said Nessa, with a touch of humour in her voice.

‘ I’ll tell you, Miss Grahame, as clear as I can, and as short as possible, for there’s no time to lose. And what I tell you is correct, for I’ve thought it over night and day, and made inquiries here, there, and everywhere, and come at the truth all round. You know Griffiths ?’

‘ No, I do not.’

‘ You know what has been going on this last week or two ?’

‘A great deal is quite unintelligible to me.’

‘I’ll try and make it intelligible, miss. If you live till you are twenty-one, you will come into a big fortune; if you die before then, it will go to Mr. Redmond. You know that?’

‘Yes.’

‘You have insured your life for five thousand pounds, and handed over the policy to old Nichols; and if you die before you have the money to redeem that policy, he’ll get the five thousand out of the insurance company—you see?’

‘Yes.’

‘Now, Redmond is a villain, and my governor’s another. The two have got one object—to take your life before you are twenty-one. They are hand and glove one with the other. They’re working together, and the governor is paying the exes—the cash, I

mean ; and if money and villainy together can do it, you will be—I can't look at you, miss, and say it ; but you can see by the look of my face what I mean.'

'They will kill me ! Oh, I can hardly believe that !'

'But, pardon me, miss, you must believe it. You can read in the paper cases enough as mercenary and wicked as this. You've had a proof of Redmond's villainy ; my governor is equal to anything where there's money to be made. It's all business to him.'

'Yes, yes !' Nessa assented, turning round in apprehension at the sound of wheels behind them.

'You needn't be afraid, miss. No one will lay a hand on you to-day, being Sunday. While the governor is engaged in the business, there'll be no violence committed, you may depend on it. All will be done legally.'

‘ What can be done legally that I need fear ? ’

‘ Oh, a lot ! In the first place, they’ll send Mrs. Redmond to quod—I mean prison—for getting goods under false pretences, and pawn-ing things that are not hers to pawn. Well, that will be no harm to you. But, at the same time, they will prove that you are of unsound mind, and either put you into a lunatic asylum, or hand you over to the keeping of Mr. Redmond. That is sure. I know the two rascally doctors that they have already engaged to prove that you are insane, and you saw one of them on Friday.’

‘ I ? ’

‘ The old gentleman who got into the train at Three Bridges. Perhaps you caught sight of him yesterday.’

‘ An old gentleman who travelled with me—he looked like a doctor ? ’

‘ That’s him.’

‘ No ; I have not seen him since the day I came here.’

‘ He has seen you, though. Saw you and Mrs. Redmond come out of a shop, and followed you to Henson’s Hotel. Found you were staying there. Meanwhile, the regular detective who is hunting with him discovered that Mrs. Redmond had raised money on some silver which she got from a house in Bond Street three weeks ago, on credit, in your name.’

‘ We intended to pay for it when Mr. Nichols paid us the money he promised.’

‘ Yes ; but Mrs. Redmond pawned it when she knew there was no prospect of her getting the money. Anyway, she’ll be sent to gaol when it comes to be tried. I don’t want to say anything against a friend of yours, miss, but——’

‘ Please, don’t,’ Nessa broke out ; ‘ everyone

misunderstands her : only I know that she is good and generous.'

' Well, I'll say nothing more about her if you tell me not to. But I was going to ask you to leave her as the best means of saving yourself.'

' Oh, I will not leave her ! I have said so already.'

' Yes ; I know you have. That young fellow has gone back to Denmark. P'raps you don't know that the price he paid for learning where to find you and how to save you was a promise to his father that he would never see you again unless you separated from Mrs. Redmond for good and all. He kept his word. He's gone.'

Nessa bent her head, struggling to keep back the tears, biting her trembling lip, striving to gulp down the something in her throat that seemed to choke her. She had only half realized the young Dane's chivalrous sacrifice,

and in her heart fostered the hope that they should meet again. Now she was sure that she should never see him more.

‘ Griffiths told me that, having it from old Petersen. He was a fine young fellow, that he was ! But it’s a pity he wasn’t a little more fly—more on his guard, I mean. You see, when he sent the carriage back, the tees—the police, you understand—got at the driver, and found out where he had left young Petersen. They reckoned he’d gone to see after you ; learnt from the clerk at Radford’s that you had gone to the hotel ; wired the governor, who immediately sent Pierce and Dr. Kenwyth—the old gentleman you met in the train—to follow you up from the hotel. That’s how you got blown—I mean discovered—so quick. However, that is no great gain on their side. You must have been found in a fortnight or so if they had lost the scent altogether, with Mrs. Redmond a-playing the

fool. You must excuse me, miss, for I can't help saying that she is playing the fool to go on in this style. She's continually courting attention and setting the police on the watch. Here she is, carrying on the same rig she ran in London, and that before she's been in the place half a day. What has she done to escape detection ? Changed her name ! as if even a policeman were to be blinded by such a dodge. Changed her name: nothing more ! Why, she hasn't even dyed her hair. She hasn't altered her style of dress—nothing. It's just like that sort of women ; they're as reckless as the deuce I know 'em.'

‘Know whom ?’ Nessa asked in trepidation.

‘Why the pros, you know. She was a professional. Began in the music-halls, and took parts in pantomimes. I thought I knew her the first time I saw her. She played Prince Poppet at the Surrey, and then took

to horse-riding at Sangers'. They've got no idea beyond the present moment. "Oh, it'll all come right at night"—that's their motto. They take a jump at a thing without seeing what's on the other side ; just as she used to jump at those papered hoops, trusting to come down all right on the horse's back when she'd got through. Mind you, miss, I don't say she's not a good woman just because she's been a pro ; though I never can think she's a proper friend for you. Many of 'em are as good as gold: warm-hearted and generous, and all that kind of thing. But they are so fearfully impulsive, and they won't calculate consequences in a business-like way. While they've got money they'll chuck it about anywhere. I'll be bound Mrs. Redmond has blued—spent—best part of what she got on Friday: warrant she hasn't five pounds in her purse, and is setting her mind on getting something to-morrow that will cost ten. Now, how's a

woman to escape notice going on like that, and how are you to escape while you stick to her ? You might just as well go about with your name on your back for everyone to read and talk about. That is why,' he continued, returning to his humbler tone, ' I would again venture to suggest that you should separate —for a time, say. And you may take it, Miss Grahame, that it's as much for her advantage as yours. For the governor and Redmond won't bother themselves about her or spend a farthing in bringing her to justice, except as a means of getting you into their hands. Do you follow me, miss ?'

' Yes ; I think I understand you.'

' Who's paying the tees to hunt down Mrs. Redmond ? Her husband and my governor. Well, the moment they cease to pay, the tees will jack up—I mean, throw up the job—and Mrs. Redmond will be as safe out of this

scrape as if she were the Queen of England. If you part, you will save her from going to gaol. If you don't part, and she keeps on as she is going now, she will get three years as sure as she's alive, and you—— No, I cannot think of that.'

' Surely it is not so bad as you imagine. Cannot I appeal to a magistrate, telling him everything that concerns myself, without reserve ?'

' What could a magistrate do ? At the best he might advise you to consult an able solicitor—supposing that he believed your story. Well, suppose you act on his advice and go to a good solicitor. The first question he would put when he had heard you out would be what means you have for moving the courts. What have you ? Nothing. He could only shrug his shoulders and recommend you to try someone else.'

' But could we not raise money——'

Mr. Levy stopped her.

‘For Heaven’s sake, keep clear of money-lenders!’ he exclaimed. ‘Nichols is no worse than the rest, and a great deal better than some. Not one amongst ’em would dream of advancing money before making inquiries, and who would lend a penny when it is found you are in danger of being put into a lunatic asylum, or your estate thrown into Chancery! Inquiry of any sort must end in Redmond discovering your whereabouts, and getting you into his hands.’

‘Then, what am I to do?’ Nessa asked in despair, stopping dead short, and facing the young man.

‘Go back to London by the next train. It is the safest place in England for you if you are alone, and only take the simplest precautions.’

‘I have no money—not enough to take me

to London: no means of getting any when I am there.'

'Miss Grahame, will you allow me to offer you what I have, as a loan, which you may repay me when you have the means? And please do not misunderstand my intentions—I—I shall not intrude upon you: I will not even ask you to let me accompany you to London. I would not even suggest which part of London it would be most advisable for you to live in, for fear you might suspect me of a wish to take advantage of your position. We will part here, and I will walk on to Rottingdean while you go to the station, if you will only consent to take this.'

Exalted by true gentlemanly feeling, Mr. Levy spoke like a gentleman, and appeared like one, despite his particularly Sunday-looking get-up.

As he concluded, he offered a very new

purse, which looked as if it had been bought for the occasion

‘Oh, I cannot accept that,’ Nessa replied with dignity, tempered by warm recognition; ‘though indeed, indeed, I thank you with all my heart for your kindness and generosity. I can never forget what you have just said to me. Besides,’ she added, after a moment’s pause, ‘I must warn Mrs. Redmond of her danger.’

‘I will undertake to do that. Men are watching the place to-day. If they see you leave the house together you will surely be followed.’

‘Now, what am I to do?’ Nessa asked herself, seeking earnestly to find the right course by the light of conscience. After brief reflection it appeared to her.

‘I must go back to my friend, Mr. Levy. I feel that it is my duty to do so,’ she said.

The young man remonstrated; but Nessa was firm now that she felt she was doing right, and he held her in such reverence that he gave up the attempt to dissuade her from her purpose.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LIKE other shallow persons who think themselves deep, and who are headstrong and reckless while confident in their own security, Mrs. Redmond was helpless and panic-stricken in the presence of disaster. She listened with growing dismay as Nessa related clearly and truly all that had passed between herself and Mr. Levy, and sat speechless with fright for a minute or two when all was told.

‘ He said they could send me to prison for three years ! ’ she gasped at length.

‘ Unless you separate yourself from me ; in that case you would be perfectly safe from any further pursuit.’

‘Then that is what I must do. I will go by the next train. Ring the bell; I must have a brandy and soda. Order a fly. Where’s my bag? Get those things out of the next room.’

‘We must take nothing away from here. Nothing belongs to us. And——’ seeing that the old discussion was likely to recommence, and that a more powerful argument was necessary, ‘I believe that the man over there at the corner is one of the detectives who are watching us.’

Mrs. Redmond, looking through the blinds, declared she recognised him as one of the men whom she had evaded at St. John’s Wood. Then, in the fury of impotence, she turned upon Nessa and burst out into a torrent of silly regrets and unjust reproaches—wishing she had never been born, that she had never seen Nessa, that she had never left her husband, and accusing Nessa

of being the cause of her ruin. Finally, having exhausted her passion, she burst into tears.

Nessa waited calmly till the storm was past, and then said quietly:

‘Your position cannot be worse than it was at Grahame Towers. It may be very much better. You have nothing to fear when you leave me, and with your theatrical ability you can obtain an engagement wherever you please, I dare say.’

‘Then, what would you advise me to do, dear?’ asked Mrs. Redmond humbly, between a couple of sniffs, recognising the girl’s superior strength by her self-command.

‘Leave me here. While one remains in the hotel the men will not leave it. Take the train after lunch when you feel more composed.’

‘And you will send on the things to

London to-morrow—send them to Victoria to be left till called for ?

‘ No. I shall go away to-night, and I shall take nothing with me.’

‘ But I haven’t got anything. Here’s only three sovereigns !’ she exclaimed in despair, opening her *porte-monnaie*.

‘ I must ask you to lend me one to take me to London.’

‘ You can get up for four and sixpence.’

‘ Then give me four and sixpence,’ said Nessa quietly, trying to overcome the feeling of shame in asking this last favour.

Lunch and a liberal dose of brandy and soda restored a little courage to Mrs. Redmond ; and with courage the gambler’s hope of recovering losses and winning fortune returned. She well knew that the day for making a great hit on the stage by her personal charms was past, and that thirty shillings a week was about the market

value of her ‘theatrical ability,’ as Nessa called it. No; if ever she was again to live in luxury, it could only be through Nessa, and so, with growing recklessness, she at length resolved that, come what might, she would not lose sight of the girl.

‘Chummie,’ she said, in the genial tone adopted in her most amiable moments, ‘I’ve made up my mind to stick to you. Don’t mind what I said this morning. When we’re upset we say anything. I have stuck to you from the beginning, and I’ll stick to you to the end. I know how we’ll do ‘em to-night. You leave it to me. We’ve done ‘em before, and we’ll do ‘em again. I’m not going to abandon you. Why, you’d be in the workhouse or the hospital before the end of the week. We can live cheaply—two chumming together, almost as cheaply as one. And we’ll go on the Q.T.’

‘What is that?’ asked Nessa, with a vague idea of ocean steamers.

‘Why, the strict quiet, you little mug?’

Mrs. Redmond had already abandoned Brighton in imagination, and dropped instantly into the slang of that profession she began to see must be returned to for a time.

‘Mr. Levy counselled that strongly.’

‘Oh, you’ll find me as fly as he is now I’m up to the ropes. I know the very pitch for us: Shoreditch—that’ll queer ’em.’

Nessa said nothing, but she thought her friend had taken rather too much brandy, which was not improbable.

‘What are you thinking about, chummie? You look precious glum. Oh, I know—you think I must be a precious juggins to stick to you with the chance of being lagged for my pains. Well, I dare say I am a fool; but, hang it! I won’t have it

said that I turned my back on a chum in trouble.'

Perhaps Nessa was thinking that her own life was jeopardized by this adherence, but she kept the reflection to herself, and in accepting this new lease of companionship made no boast of her own generosity.

When all the bells in Brighton were clanging in hideous discord, and the streets were crowding with people on their way to church, Mrs. Redmond and Nessa left the hotel. At the last moment Mrs. Redmond had borrowed a Church Service, which she carried before her, to Nessa's shame. At the corner of the street they parted—Nessa going towards the pier, and Mrs. Redmond into the nearest church. The spies, who had no reason to suspect anything, were completely thrown off their guard by this ruse, and gave up work for the day.

At 10.15 Mrs. Redmond stepped out of the

train at London Bridge, and there met Nessa, who had arrived by the preceding train. Their dress in that part of the town was conspicuously lady-like ; they had not a vestige of luggage, and very little money ; of necessity, therefore, they had to seek refuge for the night in a place where no questions are asked. Close by the station they found a nondescript house of entertainment, something between a coffee-shop and tavern, where a slatternly woman, without demur, led them up two flights of uncarpeted and dirty stairs, and, showing them into a double-bedded room, set down the candle with a yawn, and asked Mrs. Redmond for half a crown, as it was the custom of the house for lodgers to pay over-night.

Nessa had never been in such a room before, and looked round in shuddering disgust at the yellow linen of the beds, the greasy slips of carpet on the dark floor, the

frouzy stuffed chairs, the chipped toilet service, and the walls that seemed to have imbibed yellow fog for many years from the river. The atmosphere was redolent of all the rancid smells of Tooley Street, with a whiff of fried bacon and herring from below superadded. Mrs. Redmond seemed to take these discomforts as a matter of course, and even showed herself acquainted with damaged door fastenings by tilting a chair and wedging the back of it under the knob of the handle. Her indifference surprised Nessa, for hitherto she had shown herself distressingly particular in the proper appointment of her room, and would have her bed remade if the sheets were not folded to her liking.

However, this experience prepared Nessa for what was to come, and she had less hesitation in agreeing that the lodgings they found the next morning in Spital Square would do when she thought of the horrible

room in which she had passed that miserable, sleepless night. The square was quiet ; the house looked respectable. There was a silk warehouse on the ground floor ; their three rooms were neatly furnished ; the linen was fairly white and clean, though Nessa could never accustom herself to unconsciousness of the acrid, smoky smell peculiar to sheets and curtains and blinds in the City.

The housekeeper who let the rooms undertook to come in for an hour every morning to light the fire and to do the rough work ; for the rest of the day the ladies had to wait upon themselves. On Monday evening, Mrs. Redmond declared herself so delighted with Nessa's performance as a housewife that she should henceforth leave all the domestic arrangements to her. This gave Nessa plenty to do. That did not displease her at all. She was glad of the occupation, not only as a mental distraction, but as a means

of lessening her obligation to Mrs. Redmond.

But she knew nothing of cooking, and some of her first experiments were terrible failures. These failures were the subject of much silly sarcasm on the part of Mrs. Redmond ; her banter, however, was less hard to endure than the gloomy silence with which she regarded an underdone pudding or an overdone chop after a few days. That was trying ! Besides cooking and washing up, Nessa found it necessary to provide herself with a change of clothes, and, with a view to economy, she bought some stuff with a few shillings grudgingly lent to her by Mrs. Redmond, and did her best to cut it and make it up ; though this also was experimental work to her, and she came in for plenty of ill-natured chaff over it.

Mrs. Redmond herself did nothing except read penny novelettes and yawn at the

window. She bought her things ready-made, and when the last shilling was gone, hinted that Nessa's muddling extravagance would ruin them.

As credit was not to be got in Spitalfields, and food was an absolute necessity, Mrs. Redmond took an omnibus to Old Ford on Saturday morning, pawned some trinkets there, and returned jubilant with two pounds ten. She was always at her best when she had money to spend, and before she had drawn off her gloves, she said :

‘Chumminie, we’ll go to a show to-night.’

Nessa was human—that is to say, not otherwise—and after being cooped up indoors for best part of a week, and enduring a great many little miseries in silence, the idea of a long evening in a theatre set the blood dancing in her veins. Still, she made an effort to be reasonable, and suggested that they ought to save their money.

‘Oh, bother !’ exclaimed Mrs. Redmond ‘What a wet blanket you are ! Why can’t you be jolly when you’ve got the chance ? What’s the good of meeting misfortunes half-way ? It’s bound to come all right in the end.’

Nessa yielded ; and so, in the evening, they went to Olympia, where the International Hippodrome Company had just opened their season—Mrs. Redmond taking a hansom from Norton Folgate, after buying a new pair of gloves for the occasion.

In the entrance lobby Mrs. Redmond recognised a gentleman in evening dress as an old friend.

‘Jimmus !’ she said, laying her hand on his arm familiarly.

‘Hallo, Totty !’ he returned, recognising her, and shaking her hand warmly. ‘Shouldn’t have known you in that wig.’

Mrs. Redmond had profited by the hint

of Mr. Levy, and changed her hair dye to the chestnut tint then just coming into fashion.

‘What do you do here?’

‘Come to see the gee-gees. My friend, Miss Dancaster — Mr. James Fergus,’ she said, introducing Nessa, to whom she had given this new name.

Mr. Fergus raised his hat to Nessa, and replaced it with the regulation tilt, and shook hands, with a lengthened look of admiration.

‘What are you doing here, Jimmus?’ asked Mrs. Redmond.

‘Bossing the show for Duprez.’

‘Delighted to hear it. Any opening for an old chum?’

‘Well,’ said Mr. Fergus, with deliberation, casting another admiring glance on Nessa, who clearly occupied his thoughts more than the ‘old chum’ — ‘might find

something. Are you in the line, Miss Dan-caster ?'

Mrs. Redmond answered for Nessa, who looked perplexed by the question.

' Oh, we're both on,' said she. ' With proper riding-habits, of course. *Haute école*, you know.'

' Bit busy in the front just now. But I'll come round and see you presently. Where will you go—stalls or a box ?'

' A box, of course. You don't think we're going in with the cattle.'

Mr. Fergus went to the pay place, and gave them a pass, repeating his assurance that he would come and look them up when the front was clear, and raising his hat again.

As they followed the attendant through the corridor, Mrs. Redmond whispered :

' It's all right, chumnie! The trick's done. We shall be in this show next week as safe as houses !'

CHAPTER XIX.

‘I DON’T quite understand,’ said Nessa, when they were alone in the box, and Mrs. Redmond had disposed herself where she could be seen to advantage. ‘What did you mean when you said we should be in this show?’

‘Mean! Why, that if you don’t muff it, we shall get an engagement here.’

Nessa looked round the thronged building. The overture was being played. Ring after ring of gas jets sprang into flame. The electric light glared out of the great white glasses. At the thought that she might be one of those whom all these people came to see, that this music was to herald her, and

this light to illuminate her, the young girl felt her heart bound, and her hair crisp, and a thrill in every nerve of her body.

‘Jimmus is a good sort,’ Mrs. Redmond explained, in a voice that seemed coldly emotionless to Nessa’s tingling ears. ‘He was sweet on me before I was fool enough to marry ; and if he can get me back on the tan, he will ; but I’m not going to make myself cheap. If he wants me, he’ll have to take you as well. We’ll go in a pair, chummie—four quid a week. That’ll do us.’

She had not failed to see the manager’s admiring glances at Nessa, and was shrewd enough to know that her own engagement was more dependent upon Nessa’s influence than Nessa’s engagement upon hers ; but, as she had said, she would not make herself cheap.

‘Oh, I shall pull you through,’ she added ; ‘you leave it all to me, mind.’

‘But I know nothing about this profession,’ Nessa said.

‘You needn’t let that out. You can sit a horse: that’s good enough.’

The company had entered in procession, and were parading the long elliptical arena.

‘I should not have to appear like that?’ Nessa said interrogatively, indicating a group of girls dressed as Bacchanals.

‘Oh no; that’s our sort.’

And Mrs. Redmond nodded to a row of six girls in riding habit on beautiful mounts.

Nessa gave a little sigh of relief.

‘They do the race and steeplechase business,’ Mrs. Redmond continued, pointing out the numbers in the programme.

‘How could I do that?’ Nessa asked.
‘I’ve never jumped anything.’

‘Oh, it’s easy enough. The jumps are all faked. I could do ‘em on my head.’

‘ Could you ?’ said Nessa naïvely, looking at her stout companion.

She watched the races with keen interest and growing excitement. It woke up the old daring and adventurous spirit that had led her into mischief at school. She felt that if she were in the race she would set her horse at anything, and make it win by the sheer force of her own will. In the last race she figured herself on the leading horse, her hand turning instinctively as if she felt the reins ; her shoulders braced, her features set, and her eyes flashing with indomitable pluck. She was unconscious that Mr. Fergus had come into the box, and was sitting not a yard from her, listening to Mrs. Redmond, but with his shrewd, business eye fixed under the tilted brim of his opera hat upon herself.

‘ You’d beat ’em, wouldn’t you, Miss Dancaster ?’ he said, as the race ended, and Nessa’s body relaxed.

‘I wouldn’t be left behind by that girl with the orange ribbon.’

‘You shall have the opportunity of beating her as soon as you like to try. Come and see the nags.’

As he rose to open the door, Mrs. Redmond winked with significant satisfaction at Nessa.

They went down the long double row of stalls, each occupied by a sleek horse, his name on an enamelled plate upon the wall beyond. Nessa, who loved horses, was in ecstasies.

Nessa strolled from stall to stall, caressing in each a new favourite, while Mrs. Redmond and Fergus talked business.

‘There’s the flower of the flock,’ said Fergus, coming presently to her side. ‘*Espérance*! How are you, beauty?’

The mare pushed out her head and touched his cheek with her satiny muzzle.

‘I wouldn’t trust her with any girl in the

show,' he continued in his deliberate tone, as Nessa caressed the beautiful creature's head. ' But I shall consider myself no judge of horsewomen if you don't saddle her before you've been here a month.'

Another covert wink from Mrs. Redmond led Nessa to understand that the preliminaries were already settled.

At that moment a burst of music from the arena within seemed to proclaim that future triumph which the manager augured for Nessa, and she trembled with such elation as she had never before experienced.

' May as well have it down on paper, I think,' said Mrs. Redmond.

' We'll go into the office, and settle it at once, if Miss Dancaster pleases.'

Nessa assented ; and they went into an office where there were a table, two chairs, and a marvellous litter of pictures, programmes, photographs, lithographs, tinted

designs of costume, specimen properties, letter-clips, bill-files, and soda-water bottles. Mr. Fergus offered the chairs to the ladies. Mrs. Redmond preferred to sit on the corner of the table, allowing the manager to avail himself of the odd chair and seat himself before his blotting-pad. Then came a discussion as to the terms of the agreement, which was, for the most part, incomprehensible to Nessa. There were so many words unknown to her, and her head was all of a whirl with the strangeness of everything about her, and the bewildering prospect opening before her. However, Mrs. Redmond, now that she was in the element to which she had been born, showed herself as shrewd and clear-headed as Fergus himself, and got her own way in all the stipulations with regard to dresses, dressing-room, 'extra shows,' and the like. She signed the agreement for herself and Nessa, which was a relief to the girl, who was

in doubt as to what her Christian name was to be, and took charge of the counterpart signed by the manager.

‘I shall be here on Monday morning, and will put you through your business,’ Fergus said kindly, when they were parting at the refreshment bar.

‘You are very kind,’ replied Nessa ; and then, conscious of her own silence and embarrassment, she added, ‘I am afraid you must think me very stupid.’

‘My dear Miss Dancaster, I should not have engaged you at sight if I had thought you stupid. And,’ he added, dropping his voice, as Mrs. Redmond turned to finish her brandy and soda, ‘I certainly should not have taken Totty on again if I had not felt quite sure that you would compensate for all the trouble she’ll give us.’

It occurred to Nessa the next day, and not before, that this engagement would expose

them to discovery by the men who were seeking them. But Mrs. Redmond, who had now got over her fright, ridiculed the suggestion.

‘What a croaking little coward you are !’ she said contemptuously. ‘It’s the last place in the world where anyone would go to look for us ; and the chance of being spotted by accident is just as great if we only walked through Bishopsgate Street once a day. I can’t afford to keep you with nothing coming in, you know. We must do something. I do call it ungrateful. Besides, who’s going to spot us ; and how are we to be spotted ? Do you think they’re going into two-guinea boxes to pick us out of the crowd with opera glasses--those men you’re so mightily afraid of ? The only place they’re likely to go is the shilling gallery, and there I’d defy anyone to recognise even me. But I suppose you think because Jimmus soaped you down that

you are going to have all the house to yourself. You can just undeceive yourself, my dear ; you'll go in with the crowd, and be no more noticed than one pin in a packet. As for that, I don't believe anyone is after us, unless it's your friend, Mr. Levy. I consider that business was a clear loss to me of twenty pounds—running away, like a pair of fools, for nothing at all.'

Nessa said no more upon the subject ; indeed, she ceased to think of it, and all sense of danger went from her in the life of excitement she entered upon the next day. On Monday morning she went to her first rehearsal, and passed through a series of surprises. At the entrance she was greeted with a familiar, 'How d'ye do, dear ?' by a very ordinary-looking little man in gaiters, an absurdly short jacket, and a deer-stalker. It was only when she had looked him full in the face, indignant at this unceremonious

overture, that she recognised him as Mr. Fergus. The stablemen, all in livery at night, were now as rough and dirty as country inn hostlers. Horses were being groomed, barrows of litter stopped the gang-way, the passages were swilled with water, and there was a confused noise of buckets shifting, hoofs rattling, water running, brooms sweeping, the eternal hissing of grooms, and sundry rough objurgations.

‘Your dressing-room is number six. There it is,’ said Mr. Fergus, who had taken charge of Nessa, leaving Mrs. Redmond with an old friend recognised among the pallid crowd of loafers in the entrance lobby. ‘Better take off your jacket and hat. I’ll go and find a tile and a skirt.’

Nessa went to a large dressing-room, removed her jacket, and was lost in wonder at the assortment of paints and powders on the tables, when Fergus returned with a skirt

and riding hat, coming into the room without the slightest formality. Then they went down into the amphitheatre, which looked a vast place and dull in the thin mist, through which the gray light of day filtered from above. The mist was thicker where the sweepers were at work in the auditorium. There was a carpenter busy somewhere, his hammer seeming to wake a dozen echoes. A peal of laughter came from another part. Three men were in the orchestra, and one was running through a dance-tune. In the ring six or seven men and women, in ordinary dress and mounted, stood in groups chatting.

‘Why don’t you begin that cotillon? What are you waiting for, Jennings?’ called Mr. Fergus.

‘Set ain’t complete, sir; waiting for Madame de Vere.’ (This was the latest name adopted by Mrs. Redmond.)

‘She’s begun already,’ muttered Fergus.

Then, calling a man who was raking the tan, he sent him with a peremptory message to Mrs. Redmond, and told him to bring Mignon and Aventurière from the stalls.

‘Have you known Totty long?’ he asked, turning to Nessa.

‘No; not a very long while.’

‘Ah, I have. Probably I know a good deal more about her than you do; so perhaps I ought to tell you that she’s a dangerous woman. You’re bound to live with her, I suppose?’

‘I am under great obligation to her,’ said Nessa warmly. ‘I can never repay her for all she has done for me.’

‘I’m sorry for you, my dear. She’ll never leave you till she’s repaid herself, and cleared off the obligation.’

Nessa felt a miserable sinking at her heart. For some days she had struggled against the

evidence of her senses to believe that her friend was honest and good and generous ; just as she had striven at times to continue a pleasant dream in spite of awaking consciousness that the vision was unreal ; and now the accumulating evidence was too strong to be ignored, and Mrs. Redmond's character looked as dull and artificial as the International itself appeared by the light of day. A good many illusions had been dispelled in these last few months, and she felt that things and people must be judged by the light of reason rather than by the glamour of inclination. But the material view was very depressing to her young mind.

The first trot round the arena, however, set her blood in motion and revived her. Fergus kept by her side, coaching her as they went.

‘ Look at the audience when you’re trotting. That will be your mount for the first week or so ; tidy old mare, safe and sure, and knows

her business. Rein a bit looser: that's it. The starting-place is down there by that barrow. Give her a cut, and let her go when we come there. Do three turns as hard as you like; but mind you take the inside at the top of the lap and the outside at the bottom. Make your speed in between. Now then, off!"

It was a glorious run. Nessa's excitement grew with every stride of her mare. She had never gone the pace before. On the last lap she was seized with a desire to outstrip Fergus; and she succeeded, too, passing the barrow a neck ahead.

'That's all right. You'll do,' said Fergus. 'But when there are half a dozen of you, you'll have to take the outer lap wider.'

Nessa proposed that they should run it again; Fergus declined with a laugh, saying he could show her what he meant at a canter. Nessa put her mare at a canter in a minute.

‘That’s prettily done,’ said Fergus. ‘Mignon understands you already.’

Nessa turned upon him smiling. She liked the man, although he was free in laying his hand on her arm and calling her ‘dear ;’ but his familiarity was far less offensive than the studied formality of some men. It was natural, and there was no suspicion of any *sous entendu* in what he said. For certain, Fergus was well pleased with her. She was smart without knowing it ; graceful without affectation ; and her face sparkled with mingled innocence and mischief.

‘What is it ?’ asked Nessa, suddenly discovering the manager’s eye fixed on her, and passing her handkerchief down her nose in the expectation of finding a smut on it.

‘I’m looking at your complexion. Look here, dear, don’t let them humbug your face about in the dressing-room. Don’t have anything on, or you’ll spoil it. It’s just perfect

now. And don't let them mess your hair about either. Just that natural curl fluttering out over your temple : nothing more. No bangs and no dye. The rich colour of the hair just throws up the pale tint of your forehead, and the lovely——'

'Oh, don't, please !' pleaded Nessa, with a fine show of her teeth, as she laughed at the compliments of her enthusiastic friend.

'My dear girl, you must allow me to be just as careful about your looks and as proud of 'em as I am about the appearance of my pet mare *Espérance*. It's all business. Now, Jennings, put up those two hurdles.'

Then they proceeded with the lesson.

'I can see that's your first jump. You kept your seat pretty well ; but you'll have to do it better than that,' said he, when Nessa had taken the hurdles. 'Try it again. I'll give you a lead. Don't bother about the mare ; she knows her business. Just let

yourself swing. Now, then—*houp-là*, Mignon !

The hurdles, at first set up at an angle, were, by the manager's orders, fixed upright, when Nessa fell into the trick of taking them easily ; and then the girl only regretted that they were not higher. She felt a delightful thrill every time her mare rose ; it was like soaring on wings.

It seemed to her that they could not have been rehearsing more than half an hour when Fergus, looking at his watch, said, ‘That’s enough for to-day. To-morrow morning, eleven sharp, ladies,’ he called to the rest of the company, who, under the direction of the ballet master, were going through some complicated combinations in the centre of the arena. ‘ You can come in whenever you will,’ he added, turning to Nessa. ‘ I’ll speak to the stud-master, and he’ll give you a mount. Of course, if you like to come into the evening

show, you can have a box. You'll pick up a wrinkle or two watching the others, and get accustomed to the look of the house, and that sort of thing.'

'Oh, thank you. I am very much obliged to you,' Nessa said warmly.

CHAPTER XX.

‘ BOTHER Spitalfields !’ said Mrs. Redmond on Wednesday, when they left Olympia to go home.

Nessa nodded. It was almost on her lips to say ‘ Bother Spitalfields !’ also. Spitalfields is not a nice place. On market mornings the thoroughfares are choked with costermongers’ barrows, and the men quarrel and swear a great deal, and beat their donkeys shamefully. At other times there is much unpleasantness of various kinds in the neighbourhood. But the great objection in Nessa’s mind was that it lay so far from Olympia. She would have lived in Olympia if she might. The first rehearsal had banished all her melancholy mis-

givings. Her heart and soul were in the business. She loved every horse in the stalls, and found charms in the place, even by the light of day, which she had never anticipated. She had the novice's pride in being behind the scenes, and there were such delightful experiences to look forward to ! She left the building with a regret that only gave place to a feverish eagerness for the next rehearsal to renew the pleasure of the past one.

Living at Spitalfields, she had been unable to avail herself fully of the manager's offer ; indeed, the time for rehearsal had been cut down to its shortest limits. For Mrs. Redmond, either from sluggish indolence or some notion of professional etiquette, could not be induced to get to rehearsal at the hour fixed, and was always the first to leave. While Nessa was fretting and fuming with impatience, ready dressed to go, and looking at the clock every other minute, Mrs. Redmond per-

tinaciously dawdled over her toilette ; and when Nessa was hoping for one more run round the tan, Mrs. Redmond came down, gloved and bag in hand, from the dressing-room, with a sharp request to know how much longer she must be kept waiting. So long as they lived in Spitalfields she felt bound to go backwards and forwards with her friend ; but that would not be the case if they lived, as most of the company did, in the neighbourhood of Olympia. And so she was very well pleased to hear Mrs. Redmond express a dislike to Spitalfields, and readily agreed to see if they could find suitable apartments in Porten Street.

The houses in Porten Street are all exactly alike. The proprietor lives in the basement, with a young family, a jaded wife, and a girl who waits on the lodgers. The entrance is up a flight of steps, and opens upon a narrow 'hall,' flanking the 'droin'-room set.' The

drawing-room is furnished with a round table, four chairs, and a chiffonier—all rickety. There is a small table in the front window, with a display of wax flowers under a glass shade. There is a profusion of 'ornaments' in Bohemian glass, and 'photos' presented by former lodgers. Folding-doors separate this room from another furnished with two bedsteads, a couple of chairs, a chest of drawers, a toilet table, and a washstand. There is no space for anything else except the lodgers, and they have to be careful how they go.

'How will this do?' asked Mrs. Redmond, when they had inspected three 'droin'-room' sets.

Nessa thought it would do just as well as any of the others; it was not two minutes' run from Olympia; so Mrs. Redmond took it at the low price of fifteen shillings a week, attendance and 'extrys' included. And that afternoon they fetched their effects from

Spitalfields, and took possession of the new lodgings. Probably Mrs. Redmond would not have troubled to go to Spitalfields had she not valued her belongings at something more than the sum they had to pay as indemnity for leaving without the customary week's notice.

It was another step downwards ; but Nessa was happily unconscious of the degradation—accepting the discomforts of these squalid lodgings as a necessary condition of her new life. She wished that the girl who waited on them would wash herself sometimes, and that the people below would, for a change, cook something else than kippered herrings in the morning and sprats in the evening ; but she reconciled herself to circumstances with a cheerful determination to make the best of them.

Thanks to attendance being provided, the domestic arrangements now consisted of giving

orders to the girl from below ; and Mrs. Redmond being equal to the performance of this function, Nessa was free to do what she liked, and, oh, joy ! had no more to trouble over the cooking of a joint or dread the turning out of a pudding. For the rest of the week she only left Olympia to sleep and to get her meals.

On Saturday there was another delightful experience for her: the costumier had brought her dresses, and she was called into the wardrobe-room to be 'tried on.' The *amazon* fitted her to perfection ; but that which enchanted her was the ultramarine habit with white satin facing and silver trimming, to be worn with a white wig and a *tricorne* in the royal hunting scene. It was delicious ! And as she looked at herself in the glass she resolved, despite Mr. Fergus's objection, to use plenty of powder and stick a patch at the corner of her lip.

It seemed to her that Monday night would

never come: it was almost too much to expect; but it came, all the same, and at half-past seven Nessa found herself, with seven other ladies in blue, waiting in dressing room No. 6 for their call. They were all very noisy and full of fun except Nessa, and she was quiet because she did not know the ladies yet awhile, though they had shown themselves friendly, and she could not quite understand what they were talking about—partly, perhaps, because her thoughts were in a tumult of expectation.

At last a bell tinkled, and a boy called :

‘ All down, ladies, for parade! ’

It was strange to Nessa to see how unconcerned they were, and how they dawdled about after this summons that stirred her very heart within her. But the overture had only just begun; it came up the stairs in gusts as the door below was swung open. She took one last glance at herself as she

passed the glass, to be sure that her wig was all right, and her *mouche* in its proper place, and went down with the rest.

It was bewildering to look down the stairs into the court below, crowded with horses and riders, all glitter and movement, as they took their places in the procession forming along the main opening. She recognised her mare, and wondered how she could get to it through all the confusion; but, in reality, there was no confusion at all, and in due course the mare was led up. She was lifted in the saddle, and led to the outside place in the front file, passing Mrs. Redmond, who, to her disgust, had been stuck in the middle of the file behind.

The overture was finished, and now there was no sound but the buzzing of voices and the clatter of hoofs; but the next moment, the conventional three bangs of the drum opening a march were heard, and the grooms

scuttled away to take their position at the head of the procession. A few moments of fluttering suspense, and then Nessa perceived a forward movement in front, and the moment after she herself was moving slowly forward. All the lights were up, the band blaring its loudest, as she passed the barrier and came into the arena.

What a sight it was! The galleries pink with human faces, the arena sparkling with the flowing stream of horses and chariots, and men and women in the gayest appointments that imagination could desire. It was enough to bewilder a girl who had not yet realized that in such a show she was no more than 'a pin in a packet'—as Mrs. Redmond put it. But Nessa kept her head, and remembering her instructions, held her mare in place and looked the audience full in the face.

In less than ten minutes it was all over,

and the ladies in No. 6 were changing for the next number. After a pause in the general clatter of tongues, one of the girls said, speaking across the room to Mrs. Redmond :

‘Look here! we draw lots who’s to win in the races.’

‘You can draw as many lots as you like, my dear; I mean to win if I can. What’s your sentiments, chummie?’

‘I should certainly like to try to win: it must be such fun,’ Nessa replied.

‘Oh, I don’t see where the fun comes in!’ said the girl. ‘There’s always a row after a free scramble.’

‘I like rows,’ said Mrs. Redmond sententiously; and as she was not to be dissuaded from her intention, it was agreed that the races should take the form of ‘a free scramble’ within the ordinary rules.

Nessa, to her great regret, took no part

in the cotillon ; but being dressed in her *amazone* for the coming race, she strolled out into the corridor, and there met Mr. Fergus.

‘ Who is to win the first race ? ’ he asked.

Nessa explained what had taken place.

‘ I thought Totty wouldn’t agree to drawing lots. There’s only one better horsewoman in the set, and that’s you. Now, you mustn’t win, my dear.’

Nessa looked crestfallen.

‘ Do as I ask you, there’s a good girl,’ said the manager kindly. ‘ I know that woman better than you do. If you beat her, she will never forgive you. Your time will come ; but while she’s here, let her win —will you ? ’

‘ Of course I will if you ask me,’ said Nessa.

He patted her shoulder, and ran off with a nod of recognition.

It called for all her self-command to keep in the rear when the race was run, and some skill too, for Nessa's mare was as eager for victory as she; but she came in last, and went off with the girls, envying Mrs. Redmond, who had won the bouquet, and was slowly trotting round the arena to the applause of the audience—the only individual recognition to be won.

Mrs. Redmond won two races out of the three on Tuesday. No one could have been more amiable than she was to Nessa.

‘I should like to see you win, chummie,’ she said.

‘Would you, truly?’ asked Nessa.

‘Oh, I mean what I say: you'll get into the know of it by-and-by; but, of course, you can't expect to do anything for some time, especially with such an old screw as that mare. You see, Fergus is bound to give the best mounts to the best riders.’

On Wednesday evening Fergus knocked at the door during the cotillon, and came into the dressing-room where Nessa was waiting.

‘Duprez is here,’ he said. ‘Just come over from Paris—partly to see you. You see, dear, it’s like this: I flatter myself on being a born *entrepreneur*, and it’s chiefly for my services as a smart *entrepreneur* that Duprez has made me his right-hand man.’

‘Pardon me—what is an *entrepreneur*?’ Nessa asked, interrupting him.

‘Well, in our business it’s a man who can spot a good thing and snap it up. The best are those who seize opportunities before there is time for them to escape. I spotted you, and determined to get you if I could. That’s why I was so ready to conclude business with Totty. Now, the more I have seen of you, the more convinced I am that I was right in my selection—so convinced

that in writing to Duprez I let myself go about you, with this result, that Duprez, who is even more anxious than I am to get a good thing, has come over, partly, as I tell you, to see what you can do. And so I think I shall have to let you go to-night, and risk putting Totty's nose out of joint.'

'Oh, I'm sure she won't mind,' Nessa exclaimed, beaming with delight. 'She said she should like to see me win.'

'Ah, well; she'll have her wish gratified to-night, or I'm mistaken. Go steady, take your top lap wide, and keep cool.'

Nessa was glad that there was half an hour to wait, for at that moment she felt that she had not the strength to keep her seat in the saddle.

'Better not tell Totty that Duprez is in the house; and don't mention my name,' said Fergus, in parting.

So Nessa only said in a quiet tone to her friend that she should try her best to win, without telling why.

‘That’s right, chummie,’ said Mrs. Redmond, with the magnanimity of one who has no fear of defeat. ‘Do your best, dear.’

‘I will,’ said Nessa quietly.

CHAPTER XXI.

SIX ladies trotted into the arena for the open race, each in a black riding habit, with a knot of coloured ribbon on her shoulder—Nessa wearing blue and white. Alone in a box near the winning-post sat a very small man in a very big fur coat. A field glass hid the greater part of his face, leaving little visible but a hooked nose, a tufted chin, and a waxed moustache. Nessa felt sure this must be the great M. Duprez before she heard the French girl by her side whisper to another that it was he. Fergus on his thoroughbred stood in the middle of the open space with the bouquet for the victor in his hand.

The signal was given as the girls came

round in a fair line to the starting-place, and Nessa was left behind at the very outset. For her intelligent mare, having learnt by the experience of the two preceding nights that she was to keep back, resented the cut with which Nessa intimated a change of tactics, and, rearing up, pawed the air, shaking her head viciously under the sting of the whip.

Every eye was turned to the girl with the blue and white favour. To some it was a marvel how she kept her seat ; all were on the look-out for an accident. Another cut as the mare came to her feet brought her to a sense of the new duty before her, and, with an impetuous spring, she dashed after the other riders. Nessa was half a dozen lengths behind as she passed M. Duprez, and there was a ring of applause through the building when it was seen that, despite her disadvantage, she intended to try for a place. The mare understood it and tore over the tan,

picking up lost ground so well that when Nessa passed Duprez again she was no more than a length behind the rest, who stuck close together. The little man gave an approving sweep of his glass and smiled enchantingly—for a Frenchman.

A thunder of applause greeted Nessa as she came along on the second lap, still working hard. The other riders, who alone were unconscious of Nessa's delay in starting, were at a loss to understand the unusual excitement. Mrs. Redmond, however, who headed the race, took the applause to herself, and, elated by this testimony of admiration, kept her mare to it with whip and heel. But in finishing the second lap, Mrs. Redmond became conscious of a rider gaining on her, and, glancing back, found Nessa close on her heels.

The audience rose, and, craning forward, became wild with excitement. Duprez him-

self rose and leant forward in the box to see how the girl was coming on. The mare's head was level with Mrs. Redmond's shoulder as they passed him. The two riders heard the little man cry, 'Blue and White wins!' as they passed, and then understood what it was the audience cried as they rushed round in the final lap. 'Blue and White wins!' was on every tongue.

'No, by Jove, she doesn't!' retorted Mrs. Redmond between her set teeth, thrashing her mare afresh. But she had plied her whip from the start and her mare was dull to the sting. Nessa had been merciful, and her mare strove her utmost to show that she needed no incentive.

'Now for it, Mignon!' cried Nessa, half intoxicated with excitement as they rounded the bend.

Mignon threw herself forward with a mighty effort, and in a tumult of applause

they reached the winning-post, and the bell rang.

'I don't bear you any grudge, chummie,' said Mrs. Redmond, as they walked their mares side by side to the opposite side of the ring. 'You nearly got in.'

'I did get in,' said Nessa, feeling convinced that she was ahead of her friend before her mare gave the last magnificent leap that decided the race.

Mrs. Redmond laughed insolently.

'We shall see about that directly,' said she.

They came to a stand in front of the orchestra. Mr. Fergus rode up to the umpire, took his award, and trotted across the arena. With a touch of her whip, Mrs. Redmond stepped out to meet him.

'Very good second,' he said, with a smile ; and, passing her, he handed the bouquet to Nessa, raising his hat, and offered a few words

of congratulation, which were drowned in the thunder of applause that greeted the award.

Mrs. Redmond turned white with fury upon Fergus, swore at him, and, putting her mare to a trot, cut across the arena to the exit to mark her displeasure. It was the very worst thing she could have done ; for the audience, kindly disposed towards the defeated when defeat is taken with a good grace, is quick to resent anything like an exhibition of spleen towards its favourite. A distinct hiss followed the vexed woman, giving place to a storm of applause as Nessa, with the bouquet in her hand, trotted slowly round, bowing her acknowledgments.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Redmond, with such venomous jealousy burning in her heart as only unfortunate creatures like herself know, betook herself to the dressing-room, sent for brandy and soda, and poured out her grievances to the dressers, who listened in

silence, and did not even pretend to sympathize with her, for not a soul in the place liked the woman. When she was called for the steeple-chase, she sent an insulting message, and never budged from her seat.

The race was run without her, Nessa winning easily. The girls, delighted with Mrs. Redmond's defeat rather than with her friend's victory, waited to congratulate her, and trooped up to the dressing-room, laughing and chatting loudly, with the express intention of mortifying the common enemy.

Mrs. Redmond had her bonnet on, having purposely waited to show them all that she was not afraid of them. A silence fell on the girls as they entered in expectation of a scene. Nessa laid down the three bouquets she had won, and went to her friend with outstretched hand. Mrs. Redmond took no notice of this overture, and occupied herself with the fastening of her glove.

‘I’m off,’ she said ; ‘you can stay and settle it with Fergus. He’ll expect to be thanked.’

‘Oh, that’s nonsense,’ said one of the girls. ‘You tried all you knew to get in and lost by a neck. The audience wouldn’t stand injustice —and you know it.’

‘You’ll have to put up with your beating as we have,’ said another.

‘I don’t know why any of us should take a defeat personally,’ said Nessa. ‘It’s the horses who win ; not we. You’d have won with my mare.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ said the boldest of the party. ‘If Totty had your temper as well as your mare, she might win.’

‘At any rate, she wouldn’t have got hissed.’

Mrs. Redmond, who had prepared some smart things to say, forgot them all under this shower of taunts. She could only

assume a look of disdain as she marched to the door ; but the last sting was unendurable, and, turning at the door, she poured forth a volley of coarse abuse that made Nessa shudder.

‘ Mr. Fergus wants to see you, miss,’ said the call-boy, as Nessa was going down from her room.

She went into his office, where she found him seated with the little man in the big coat—M. Duprez. The impresario rose, took off his hat, and made a most ceremonious bow. Then he paid her an elaborate compliment on her horsemanship, which Nessa made out pretty well, and replied to in such ‘ French of Stratford-atte-Bowe’ as she could command, but with a natural grace and self-command which more than compensated her faulty pronunciation. She was no longer a raw school-girl.

‘ You understand my wishes with respect to

this young lady,' M. Duprez said to Fergus ; and, with another deeply respectful bow to Nessa, he withdrew.

‘ The boss,’ said Fergus, in a low tone, as the door closed. ‘ You saw him, I suppose. I never knew him so enthusiastic before. Well, you took the whole audience. That prance of old Mignon’s made it a regular *coup de théâtre* all through. But you handled her finely—by George, you did ! If you had put the whip on more than you did, she’d have turned rusty, and left you out in the cold.’

They talked about the race for five minutes, and then he said :

‘ Totty made a fool of herself. I knew she would. I told you how it would be. Look here—she’s just sent this in.’

He showed her their agreement, torn into half a dozen pieces.

‘ What does it mean ?’ Nessa asked.

‘ Why, it means that she breaks her engagement, and doesn’t intend to come again. For my part, I’m jolly glad. She’s a good horse-woman, but she always upsets the show wherever she goes. I told you the other day that I shoul ln’t have taken her on except to get you. I knew you were too good to be lost. Of course, your success means a success for me. Duprez wants a manager who can spot a good thing. He’s delighted with you ; and I tell you, candidly, it’s as good as a note for fifty pounds to me. Well, now Totty has broken this engagement, it allows me to make a fresh one with you ; and I offer you individually the same price I proposed to pay Totty for both—four guineas a week. In addition to that, besides the bouquets, which the dressers are always glad enough to get from you at five shillings each, there will be a money prize of ten shillings to the winner, five shillings to the second, and a consolation

prize of a pound for the girl who makes the highest number of third places in the week. You are to have Espérance, the governor says. It'll be a handicap so far as you are concerned: the rest will have a fair start, and you'll have to beat 'em. You see, these races are the most attractive thing in the whole show, and we're going to make a star of you. Look ! this is going into all the papers, and will be billed all over London before the end of a week.'

He held up a sheet of paper on which M. Duprez had sketched in large letters :

INTERNATIONAL RACES :

BLUE AND WHITE WINS !

This took Nessa's breath away. She sat silent, looking at the sheet of paper with blinking eyes that seemed dazzled by the words, and a warm flush in her face.

'Now,' continued Fergus, 'I have called

you in to say this before you go home, so that you may be prepared for Totty. This is the time when you ought to break with her for good and all, and she'll give you a fine opportunity, I bet, before she goes to sleep, or lets you rest. Go away from her, and get nice little diggings of your own in a respectable street——'

‘Oh, I cannot!’ exclaimed Nessa earnestly, though with an accent of regret.

‘What do you mean, my dear?’

‘I can’t separate from her against her wish. And I can’t accept this offer.’

‘Don’t say that—why?’

‘It would mortify her so cruelly.’

‘She would have no hesitation in mortifying you, if it were in her power.’

‘That doesn’t matter. I have told you that I am under a great obligation to her, I owe her my life!’ Nessa said impressively.

‘You may not like her, Mr. Fergus——’

‘ Nobody does,’ growled Fergus, by way of parenthesis.

‘ Then she is the more unhappy. And I must not—I cannot—do anything that would add to her unhappiness.’

Mr. Fergus was vexed ; and he looked it as he jobbed his pen into the table in morose silence. He was thinking of himself and his relations with Duprez, who had expressed his wishes significantly ; but he glanced up, and catching sight of Nessa, her cheek pale now, and her dark lashes wet with a tear, his selfishness vanished.

‘ You are a brick, Miss Dancaster,’ he said. ‘ Didn’t foresee this, though ; might if I’d reflected a bit, for anyone can see you’re not an ordinary girl.’

He rose, stuck his hands in his pockets, and looked at the floor between his feet.

Nessa rose also, but he didn’t attempt to terminate the interview.

‘I’ll tell you what, dear,’ he said, suddenly looking up. ‘I’ll square it with Totty. You leave it to me. I needn’t say that, though. Some girls would go home and tell her what has passed in here, to show up their own generosity. You won’t—I know precious well. Generous girls don’t have to show off—it’s the mean lot that have to do that. Only just you manage to go out for a walk to-morrow morning about ten or eleven, and stay out till one. I’ll drop in and see Totty. She can be squared; I know her. She’ll put up with a beating every night, if I make it worth her while. I see my way clearly enough now,’ he added cheerfully. ‘She’ll come into the show again to-morrow—especially if she thinks she is forcing me to eat humble pie; and she’s welcome to think that, for all I care. But you and I will have that agreement all the same, and we’ll get the posters up on Monday.’

And on Monday, sure enough, all London was wondering what was the meaning of the bills on the hoardings—‘ International Races : Blue and White wins !’

CHAPTER XXII.

It was a great hit. The International Races were the talk of the town. The common theme of discussion was whether the races were run fairly or not—was it an arranged thing that Blue and White should win against such odds?—and it became the thing to go to Olympia and decide by personal observation.

In the dull season before Christmas, when other places of entertainment were doing bad business, the International drew ‘big houses.’ The management had lighted upon Nessa in the very nick of time. There had been an enormous development in public taste for everything connected with sport, and through Nessa the International had succeeded in

taking the tide of Fortune at the flow. But, independent of her skill and audacity as a horsewoman, she attracted the crowd by her youth and beauty. She was called upon to sit for a fresh photograph about three times a week ; her portraits were stuck in every place of vantage in the building ; they were carried in packets by the programme boys ; they were in all the shop-windows ; she was shown, in coloured posters, flying over a five-barred gate, with the knot of parti-coloured ribbon streaming from her shoulders, and ‘ Blue and White wins !’ for a legend. Viola Dancaster was, in fact, all over London.

Nessa’s salary was doubled and doubled and doubled again. She might have commanded any terms she chose to make. In her place Mrs. Redmond would have made a fortune. Nessa was not greedy of gain. She enjoyed her life so much that it seemed to her almost too bad to take money for what gave her such

delight. It is doubtful if she fully realized the value of money, never having had more than a few shillings at a time to spend. She was glad, of course, to live in a better house, and to be waited on by a clean servant, and dress well ; but her desires only went one step further, and that was to discharge her obligation to Mrs. Redmond. To her she handed over all the money she made, taking what she needed for her own immediate requirements with something almost like an apology.

As she came to know men and women better, and obtained a clearer perception of the motives that govern their actions, her faith in Mrs. Redmond's disinterestedness died away, and she ceased even to like the woman ; but for that reason she felt more strongly than ever bound to discharge Mrs. Redmond's continually reiterated claim on her gratitude.

One morning, when Nessa had risen almost to the zenith of her popularity, Fergus said to her:

‘Miss Dancaster, which would you prefer—money or a horse?’

‘The horse,’ replied Nessa, without a moment’s reflection.

‘I knew it!’ cried Fergus, slapping his thigh in satisfaction. ‘I bet a fiver you would choose the horse. Well, now, my dear, you’ve only got to choose which horse it shall be. We’ll walk down the stalls—perhaps there’s one I can let you have.’

‘I don’t quite understand you.’

‘It’s like this: there’s a lot of betting goes on in the canteen amongst the men—the *habitués*, you know—and you’ve put a lot of money in some of their pockets. Well, they want to make you some sort of recognition, and they have asked me to do it in as delicate a manner as possible. I’m a bad

hand at that sort of thing, you know ; but I thought you would not refuse a gee-gee.'

' But I can refuse it,' said Nessa very seriously, ' if——'

' If there were any mortal reason why you should. But there ain't. Now, look here : I've got the money. Every man subscribed, but who gave a fiver or who gave fifty, I don't know ; and if I had to return the money, I shouldn't know where to begin, and should end, ten to one, in sticking to the lot myself. If you refuse it, I shall consider that it's because I am wanting in delicacy, and I shall be horribly mortified.'

' If you really think I might take it—if you could advise your own sister to take it——'

Nessa said, casting a longing eye down the row of sleek horses.

' I wish to Heaven I had a sister worthy of such a compliment ! Now, what do you think of Caprice ?'

Nessa thought Caprice was lovely, and Patatrac beautiful; and Zut charming, and so she went down the line, admiring one after the other, quite at a loss which to select from so many worthy of selection. Then suddenly she stopped with that look which was as beautiful on her face as the shadow of a cloud on a sunny landscape.

‘How much money might I have instead of the horse?’ she asked.

‘Two hundred guineas.’

‘Then I think I’ll take the money if it’s all the same.’

‘Oh, of course it’s all the same, my dear,’ said Fergus, as cheerfully as he could, for it meant the loss of his bet—five pounds out of pocket. ‘Will you have a cheque or notes?’

‘Notes,’ said Nessa, with a sigh and one long, regretful glance at Patatrac.

‘Now, what the deuce is she going to do

with the cash ?' wondered Fergus, when the transaction was concluded, and Nessa nodded a sunny 'good-bye' to him from her hansom.

Nessa drove to all the shops she could remember going to with Mrs. Redmond, asked what was owing in the name of Vanessa Grahame, paid up, and found herself in the end with barely enough to pay her cab fare home.

'Now they can't send her to prison for getting things under false pretences,' she said to herself.

She had no fear for herself now, and held Redmond in contempt ; and this fearlessness arose partly from a change in her own character, and partly because the danger was less. Physically and mentally her strength was vastly increased by the exercise in which every faculty of body and mind was daily called into play. She was no longer helpless and friendless. An inexperienced girl just

run away from school might easily be got out of the way, but it was another thing with a young woman whose face was known all over England. Kidnapping was out of the question while she had a voice and the courage to call for help ; and a dozen doctors could not prove her of weak mind in face of the witnesses she could bring to attest the contrary. She reasoned that the instinct of self-preservation would restrain Redmond from attacking her if accident led him to discover that she was Viola Dancaster, seeing that such a course would lead only to an exposure of his own villainy.

Amongst the men of the world who frequented the canteen was a well-known Q.C. One night he said to Fergus, who was always open to receive a cigar, and willing to talk about the show :

‘ I don’t see Miss Dancaster here. All the other girls drop in pretty regularly.’

‘Perhaps that’s the reason why Miss Dancaster doesn’t.’

‘Hum! Considers herself a cut above them, eh?’

‘No; there’s none of that confounded nonsense about her. She thinks none the worse of others because she respects herself.’

‘That hardly explains, Mr. Fergus, why the presence of other young ladies causes Miss Dancaster to absent herself.’

‘I’ll endeavour to make it clear even to the meanest comprehension,’ retorted Fergus smartly. ‘You gentlemen adopt a style of conversation in the presence of those young ladies which Miss Dancaster could not listen to with pleasure. She used to come in here once, and liked it. She drank champagne here with the rest, and seemed to like that too. But not for long. When she found that the women who drink champagne here

cease to be ladies, she dropped that ; and when she found that gentlemen who came here took the privilege of laying aside good manners, she dropped you. On the whole, I should think the loss is yours, for a more charming young lady doesn't exist.'

'Oh ! she is a young lady.'

'I should have thought even you could see that.'

'Thank you, Mr. Fergus.'

The Q.C. turned the cigar in his lips, looked at the ash as he expelled a thin whiff of smoke, and then, fixing one eye on Fergus, said :

'Should you be surprised to learn that the young lady is heiress to a considerable fortune ?'

'Not a bit. If she had a title I should not be astonished. From the very first I have believed that she has been driven from home.'

‘What reason have you for supposing that?’

‘Her education—manners—face—figure: everything shows birth and breeding.’

‘You have no other evidence than such as you might take in judging the character of a horse, I suppose, Mr. Fergus?’

Fergus acknowledged the hit, and said he needed none better.

‘Now, could you ask Miss Dancaster if her name is Vanessa Grahame?’

‘I dare say I could, but I’m quite sure I wouldn’t.’

‘Unless it were to the young lady’s advantage,’ suggested the Q.C.

‘That would alter the case, certainly.’

‘I think I can show you that you may ask the question without impertinence. I have lately taken into my service a clerk. His name is Levy. This young man, without knowing the interest I take in Miss Dancaster,

asked my opinion in a case where certain scoundrels have conspired to rob Miss Grahame, not only of her fortune, but her liberty also, and possibly her life. If his story is true, I believe there would be no difficulty in punishing at least one of the offenders, and restoring Miss Grahame to the position she has been forced to relinquish. Now, if Miss Vanessa Grahame and Miss Viola Dancaster are one and the same person, I might be disposed to take up her case from a feeling of respect with which I fear, Mr. Fergus, you hardly credit me.'

'Oh, you're a gentleman at heart ; it's your manners I find fault with,' Fergus said brusquely, as he knitted his brow.

'Thank you, sir,' replied the Q.C. with mock politeness. 'The first thing is to find out if Miss D—— is Miss G——, and that you can know by putting the question to her

point-blank, as I certainly should if I had the pleasure of speaking to her instead of you.'

' Restoring Miss Grahame to her position means taking Miss Dancaster out of the show. You are asking me to do too much,' said Mr. Fergus gloomily.

' But you'll do it, all the same, Mr. Fergus, unless I am greatly mistaken in your character.'

Fergus made no reply to this. It was hard lines to sacrifice his own interests for those of a friend. But it looked as if he must. Nessa had admitted that her life had been saved by Mrs. Redmond.

' Her life isn't in jeopardy now, is it?' he asked.

' Yes, it is, my friend. Her life must be in jeopardy while there are rascals who may profit by her death.'

' I'll see about it,' said Fergus coldly.

The next day he found an opportunity to speak to Nessa in private.

‘Now, don’t you say a word till you’ve heard all I have to tell you,’ he began.

And then he recounted, as closely as he could remember, all that had passed the night before between himself and the Q.C.

‘There you are, my dear,’ he said, in conclusion. ‘Now it’s for you to say whether you wish to be known as Miss Dancaster or Miss Grahame.’

Nessa reflected for a few minutes, and then she said :

‘I am very grateful to you, Mr. Fergus, and very grateful to your friend ; but I do not wish to be known by any name but Viola Dancaster.’

‘But if your life is in danger?’

‘My life is not in danger,’ replied Nessa, in a tone of conviction ; for she had quite

resolved that Redmond was powerless to harm her.

‘I’m glad to hear it, with all my heart. But there’s your position to think about.’

‘I have thought about that. I am very happy here—happier than ever I have been in my life. I like the people here—everyone. I have all that I desire. The excitement is such a delight to me that I pity those who only look on. I do not think I could live without this nightly pleasure.’

Fergus breathed a deep sigh of relief.

‘Then what am I to tell this fellow?’ he asked.

‘Tell him that Viola Dancaster refuses to acknowledge any other name.’

CHAPTER XXIII.

FOR one so young and so fresh in the field, Nessa had a wonderful amount of tact, which she owed to natural good feeling and good sense. She never wished to hurt anyone, and the wish not to hurt prevented her from giving unintentional offence. She treated others as she wished them to treat her ; she was true to them and true to herself. To sum up her character briefly, there was, as Mr. Fergus had said, ‘no confounded nonsense about her !’ And so, being ‘awfully nice’ as well as ‘awfully pretty’—and women are quite as much influenced as men are by the good looks of a girl—Nessa was liked by everyone, with the solitary exception of Mrs. Redmond.

She was a fairly large exception. Her jealousy and hatred amounted almost to a monomania. She brooded over the girl's success with envy gnawing at her heart. She had nothing else to do, being one of those wretched women whose sluggish disposition recoils from any occupation ; her reading never went beyond the advertisements in a newspaper, her interest in life was bounded by the gratification of her own appetites and passions. One passion now occupied the place of all others—this morose, vindictive jealousy of Nessa ; and every malevolent feeling of her ill-conditioned nature was concentrated in a burning desire for the girl's downfall. Her hatred was only increased by the knowledge that she owed her position in the International and her luxuries at home entirely to one whom she constantly regarded as an enemy and a rival.

One night, when her business was done and

she sat in the canteen alone at one of the round tables with her favourite drink before her, she saw, lolling against the bar at the further end of the place, her husband and Mr. Nichols, the money-lender. For the first moment she was struck with fear, having the cowardice of wickedness, but this feeling gave place to one of another kind as she reflected that they were Nessa's enemies rather than hers. Almost at the same moment Redmond caught sight of her. They stared at each other for a minute with the fixity of a couple of savage animals whose attitude is open to suspicion ; then Redmond nodded with a sickly grin, and his wife responded in the same manner. Nichols, who had turned round, also nodded and grinned. This overture being made, the two men came down and seated themselves at the round table, after shaking hands with the woman.

‘Seen the show?’ she asked, as coolly as if

the men had been the merest casual acquaintances.

Redmond nodded.

‘You’re looking pretty fit, considering——’

‘Considering what?’ she asked combatively.

‘Considering what you have to put up with. Awful come-down for you!’

‘What’s an awful come-down?’

‘Now, don’t quarrel, my dear—don’t quarrel, just as you’ve come together,’ said Mr. Nichols.

He spoke with a slight lisp and in an unctuous tone that harmonized with the amiable smile on his greasy face as he raised a deprecating hand, dirty, but glittering with a marvellously big diamond. ‘Don’t quarrel, whatever you do.’

‘What do you mean by an “awful come-down”? ’ insisted Mrs. Redmond.

‘Why, to play second fiddle to a girl who

hasn't been six months in the profession, after having it all your own way for twenty years.'

' You don't say Mrs. R. has been in it twenty years?' exclaimed Mr. Nichols, with polite incredulity.

' Do you suppose I should let her win if I weren't paid for it? I should have thought anyone could see that the races are all squared,' said Mrs. Redmond.

Redmond smiled, with a slow shake of the head.

' Of course you're squared. Everyone knows it,' said the amiable Nichols, but in such a tone that it would have been less objectionable had he told her that nobody believed her protest. ' Of course you're squared.'

' Well, I suppose they must have someone young and pretty for the business,' said Redmond. ' One can't expect London to go mad over a woman of forty, and one that lays on fat as you do.'

‘Oh, don’t, don’t, don’t!’ said the peacemaker. ‘How I do ’ate to hear two married people snacking at each other like this!’

‘If Mr. Redmond wishes to insult me——’

‘Nothing of the kind; I came to offer you my sympathy.’

‘There you go again!’ said Mr. Nichols.

‘Why will you do it?’

‘Do you think I want your sympathy?’ asked Mrs. Redmond, growing livid through the rouge.

‘Oh, I dare say you can do without it. I’m told Nessa keeps you as if you were her own mother.’

‘Now, why should you take and repeat all the little things you hear?’ remonstrated Nichols.

‘Who says Nessa keeps me?’ asked Mrs. Redmond, with difficulty lowering her voice.

‘Why, everyone says so. It’s self-evident. You go on with the crowd at five-and-twenty

bob a week and live up to about fifteen or twenty pounds a week. Stands to reason you must get that out of Nessa's pocket.'

'There's a nasty way to put it!' protested Nichols. 'Why should you say Mrs. R. takes the money, when most likely Miss G. gives it of her own free will? Don't everyone tell you that she's so generous and kind-hearted now?'

'Oh, no one can underrate the generosity of a girl who spends two or three hundred pounds to pay bills that might have brought her friend—and such a friend—into something worse than the County Court.'

'I didn't ask her to do it—the little fool!'

'Of course you didn't,' said Mr. Nichols, in that irritatingly bland tone that always gave his words the lie. 'Of course you didn't ask her to.'

'Who told you all this?' Mrs. Redmond asked, gulping down her fury.

Redmond turned round, and, peering to the right and left, said :

‘ Where’s that waiter we were talking to ? ’

‘ Do you mean to say these stories are in the mouths of the waiters ? ’

Nichols again interposed to calm the troubled spirit of the raging woman.

‘ What does it matter, my dear madam, whether it’s the waiters or the swells at the bar ? ’ he asked. ‘ Nobody believes a word about it. It’s only Mr. R.’s little way. He is so jocular, ain’t he ? ’

‘ Well, everyone’s got a good word to say for *her*—everyone except you,’ said Redmond.

‘ Oh, Mrs. R. ain’t said a word against her ; come now,’ said Nichols, in a tone of remonstrance.

‘ Very wise of her, if it’s true that she’s only kept on to oblige Vanessa.’

Mrs. Redmond’s lips quivered, but she could make no reply to her tormentors, while a kind

of fascination riveted her to the place—the feeling that leads some people to read an insulting letter through to the end and then to re-read it.

‘Don’t do anything openly to offend her—keep civil,’ pursued Redmond, always with that sickly, sinister smile creasing his cheeks. ‘I dare say it’s a hard trial, but it provides you with many things that you would have to do without otherwise.’

‘You need not trouble yourself on my account,’ Mrs. Redmond muttered, ‘since it can make no difference to your welfare.’

‘Oh, can’t it, though ! It may make a very considerable difference to me.’

‘How, pray ?’ she asked in a tone of affected indifference.

‘Why, I may think fit to come and live with you. It’s a privilege that you cannot deny me.’

‘And you wouldn’t if you could, would you,

Mrs. R.?' said Nichols blandly. 'Now, why don't you make it up and live all happy and comfortable together?'

'It's about the best thing I can do,' said Redmond, with a look that showed he seriously meditated acting upon the suggestion. 'I'm at the end of my tether; I daren't touch any more of the timber.'

'That's a truth,' said Nichols. 'I've made it clear to you that I shan't lend you another sovereign if you do anything illegal. It's my way of doing business. The moment I see one of my friends doing anything that may bring me into the witness-box I say "good-bye" to him: don't have anything more to do with him.'

'I warn you that the girl will not stand you in the house,' Mrs. Redmond said emphatically, after a moment's bitter reflection.

'You mean she'd bolt and cease to keep you. Hum! That's what I'm afraid of. And it's

what you're afraid of too, isn't it? Well, if you make it worth my while, I'll deny myself the pleasure of living with you. I can do with four or five pounds a week—you can spare me that, I dare say.'

Mrs. Redmond was too terrified by this threat to reply.

'Oh dear! oh dear!' exclaimed the distressed Nichols. 'What do you want to go frightening poor Mrs. R. like that for? I'm sure your little lodgings in Hammersmith are more suitable to you than that house in Grafton Street.'

The hint that they had discovered her address was not lost on Mrs. Redmond. Between them the two rascals were rapidly reducing her to a state of panic.

'I mean to make hay while the sun shines,' said Redmond resolutely.

'Of course you do. That's quite right and reasonable,' said Nichols blandly. 'Mrs.

Redmond isn't unreasonable. Now, why can't you come to a nice pleasant little arrangement ?'

' I've got no money. The expenses take all we get,' Mrs. Redmond protested.

' You'll have to economize.'

' I can't.'

' Oh yes, you can. You'll have to economize when Nessa drops you. You may as well begin now.'

' But the young lady won't drop Mrs. R.,' said Nichols. ' She wouldn't be so heartless.'

The innuendo scarcely stung her. Redmond took up the running.

' Oh, won't she ?' he said with a derisive laugh.

' Not unless you go making yourself unpleasant in Grafton Street, and you won't do that, will you, now ? Say you won't. Look at poor Mrs. R.'

Terror was in the woman's face at the prospect. Her husband saw it and laughed.

'Won't drop her!' he exclaimed. 'Look at those swells over there. One of 'em's got a title, and I heard him swear that he'd marry the girl to-morrow if she would have him. Well, one day one of those swells will marry her, and then do you think he'll let his wife keep Mrs. Redmond as a permanent fixture? Not he. They're not fools enough for that, those young fellows.' He turned to his wife. 'No, Nessa will drop you, my dear, and when she does drop you, Heaven only knows what will become of you. There's the workhouse; but I don't think you're fitted for that.'

'Oh, don't talk about the workhouse—a fine woman like Mrs. R.'

'What do you want, you, you, you——'

The tortured woman could not find a word vile enough to express all that she felt.

'Don't! don't!' expostulated Mr. Nichols.

‘Oh, don’t go and spoil a nice amiable action by a disagreeable word, Mrs. R. There, she asks you what you want, my friend.’

‘There’s my address,’ said Redmond, putting a piece of paper before his wife. ‘Send me a five-pound note every Saturday, and I won’t bother you. If you forget it, I’ll call for it.’

‘There, that’s very reasonable, I’m sure,’ said Mr. Nichols, laying his fat hand on Mrs. Redmond’s arm. She jerked it away.

‘Oh, you shut up, confound you !’ said she. ‘I’ve had quite enough of you. This is your plan. He could never have found the brains to carry it out alone.’

‘You really are too flattering. Upon my word you are.’

‘Flatter you ! I can’t find a name for you that doesn’t flatter——’ She rose, snatching up the piece of paper.

‘Sit down again, my dear lady,’ said Nichols sweetly, but with a curiously cun-

ning twinkle in his half-closed eyes that excited her curiosity and led her to accede. 'If you think I came here just for the sake of interfering between husband and wife, you mistake the nature of my business. I'm going to show you that I'm a real friend. I am just as anxious to promote your interest as your husband's.' He drew out a fat letter-case, and, opening it, continued : 'Look, here's a clean sheet of paper, and here's a pencil that writes indelible, and is just as legal as ink.'

He looked round. They had the end of the canteen quite to themselves. No one was within hearing-range ; nevertheless when he spoke again, leaning forward with his arms on the table, he spoke in such a low tone that Mrs. Redmond also had to lean forward.

'Now, you're behaving very handsome in giving your husband five pounds a week, which will continue as long as nothing happens to Miss Grahame ; but if anything should

happen to Miss Grahame, as matters stand at present, you would never get a penny of your money back again. That doesn't seem right and fair, and in business you ought always to be liberal and generous. Now, what I am going to propose is this—that, as Mr. Redmond shares in your prosperity while Miss Grahame lives, you should share in his prosperity if anything happens to her. That's nice and reasonable, ain't it?" he asked, turning to Redmond, who replied by a surly nod that showed clearly that the question had been decided beforehand.

"Now, I think that if anything happens to Miss Grahame, you ought, in consideration of your generosity to your husband—you ought to be made independent and comfortable for the rest of your life. So here I am writing out an agreement which you can get stamped at Somerset House to-morrow morning, making it as binding as any deed drawn up by a

lawyer—an agreement on the part of your husband to pay you—what's your name, your Christian name, my dear ?' he asked, pausing in his writing.

‘ Sophia,’ replied Mrs. Redmond, eager with a new hope that glimmered in the prospective.

‘ To pay you, Sophia Redmond, the sum of fifteen thousand pounds. You can't expect anything fairer than that, can you ?’

The woman nodded impatiently, and made a gesture for him to continue.

‘ Now, your husband is going to sign that,’ he said, putting the paper and pencil into Redmond’s hand, ‘ and I’m going to witness the signature all nice and regular.’

Redmond signed the paper, pushed it forward with morose discontent in his face, rose, and went to the bar without a word, leaving his two partners together.

‘ There you are, my dear lady,’ said Nichols,

after writing his name to witness the signature. ‘Take care of it, for it’s worth a fortune to you. Of course, while your husband has got nothing, you can get nothing by that paper; but the moment he comes into his estate by anything happening to Miss Grahame, you just present that, and you won’t have to worry about anything in the wide world.’

She leant over, and spoke with feverish eagerness.

‘In plain words, this is a security for fifteen thousand pounds to be paid me if——’

‘Hush, hush! I can’t listen to anything that I couldn’t take my oath I never heard mentioned. But if I can help you in any way—and I think I can—I shall be most happy. Now, what do you say to my dropping in like a friend to-morrow night and having a little chat about things in general?’

‘I shall be here as soon as my number is done.’

‘That’s right. Good-night, my dear lady. So glad to have brought things round nice and pleasant.’

He rose, and joining Redmond, took him out, linking his arm in the manner of an impulsive, good-natured friend.

He said nothing. But, as their eyes met, the look of cunning satisfaction that passed between them contained a whole volume of villainy.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THAT meeting took place on Monday ; it was Saturday before Mrs. Redmond again saw Nichols. He was standing near the bar, making himself agreeable to three or four shallow young men of that class which affects the higher class of Bohemianism of these days—men of good education who talk in the jargon of sporting papers, of gentle birth, who are proud to shake hands with a pugilist, and are not ashamed to be indebted to such men as Nichols for cash and anecdotes. He saw Mrs. Redmond when she came into the canteen, but he waited until he had told his story and got his empty laugh before he

strolled over to her. She received him in moody silence.

‘Sorry I couldn’t run in to see you before, my dear lady,’ he said, beckoning a waiter.

‘What’ll you take?’

Mrs. Redmond was not one to cut off her nose to spite her face, so she ordered brandy and soda.

‘You’ve been down here every night this week,’ she said, as the waiter whisked off.

‘Bless my soul, now, how did you find that out?’ asked Nichols cheerfully.

‘Oh, you’re known here well enough.’

‘Well, my dear Mrs. R.,’ leaning forward and dropping his voice, ‘ain’t that a very good reason for my dropping out before you come in? If anything *should* happen, would it do for it to be said that you and me were seen talking together night after night up in this corner—I ask you, as a lady of sound sense—is it good business?’

‘Oh, that wasn’t your only reason,’ said Mrs. Redmond, only half satisfied by the plausible excuse.

‘Why, what other reason could I have had ? Now tell me—do.’

‘I will. You waited till I had sent the five pounds to Redmond that I might feel the pinch, and be the more ready to take the next step.’

The waiter bringing the drinks at this moment, Nichols only replied by raising his finger at her as he might at a naughty child —a means not calculated to allay the woman’s anger.

‘Oh, I can see through you,’ she muttered, as the waiter departed.

‘Of course you can. I’m like a hopen book to my friends.’

‘You and Redmond came here on Monday with a regular plan. You put him up to it. He would never have thought of it himself.

You told him to exact that five pounds a week that I might be tempted to any desperate scheme to get free. You settled what he should say to stir up my jealousy, and goad me on to take vengeance.'

'Now, did we say anything that was untrue —did we ?'

Mrs. Redmond only beat her foot on the floor for response. She had recollected every taunt, every suggestion, that had been made, and it was the underlying truth which gave the sting to their sarcasm.

'It's cost you nothing,' she said ; 'it's put money into Redmond's pocket ; and you flatter yourself you've got a useful tool to work with.'

'Oh dear ! oh dear ! Why will you say such things ? Call yourself a partner in a going concern, my dear, but don't call yourself a "tool," for Heaven's sake—it's so low !'

‘ Well, what do you want me to do ? You haven’t waited to see me without a purpose.’

‘ Of course I haven’t. I ain’t come here one blessed night without a purpose. I ain’t made myself affable and pleasant with all the young swells here without a purpose. I ain’t told a funny story without a purpose. I ain’t sprung a penny piece without a purpose. It’s business, my dear ’ (he called it ‘ bithneth ’), ‘ business, business.’

He spoke earnestly, impressing each word with a tap of his fat, dirty forefinger on the table.

‘ You ask me what I want you to do, my dear,’ he continued. ‘ In the first place, I want you to understand that I’m your friend, and that we’re pulling together for one purpose, and that purpose is business. We’re each doing our share of work, like the wheels in a blessed watch, and it won’t do for one of us to get out of gear. You’ve had good proof

that you've been dealt fairly with. When you took that bit of paper to Somerset House to get it stamped, you asked the young fellow there if it was all right and binding, and you got a satisfactory answer.' His quick eye showed him that the tentative assumption was a fact. 'There, you see, you get a fortune if you pull it off all right. That ought to satisfy you.'

'I should like to know what satisfaction it will be to me if—if it doesn't come off all right. Why, it's to your interest that it shouldn't come all right—you'll be fifteen thousand pounds in pocket if'—she looked round, and seeing not a soul near, added in a hoarse whisper—'if I get hanged for murdering the girl!'

'Oh dear! Oh, Moses!' cried Nichols under his breath, raising his hands, and covering his ears in horror. 'What can you be thinking about? For a real

lady like you to use such words makes my very blood run like a penny hice down my back.'

Mrs. Redmond looked at him incredulously as he turned away from her uneasily on his chair. He caught a waiter's eye, and ordered him to refill the glasses, saying, as the man bustled off with the glasses, that he must have another drink to get that 'orrible suggestion out of his 'ead.

'There! if I thought you meant it, my dear—if I thought you likely to go and do a violence—I'd chuck the whole concern up this minute. Let us talk of something else till I've got over it.'

Mrs. Redmond gave a scornful sniff, and took a deep draught from her replenished glass. Nichols paid, and then, seemingly, opened quite a fresh subject.

'Do you know that young swell that's just going out?'

Mrs. Redmond glanced at the door impatiently.

‘What does it matter whether I know him or not?’ she asked.

‘It matters a great deal. It’s business. I’ve spent all the week inquiring about him. I’ve been here every night spending money to know all about him ; and, as I told you just now, I don’t spend a penny unless I think it’ll come back with interest.’

‘He’s a blethering idiot : that’s all I know about him.’

‘Well, I know more than that.’

‘What do you know?’

‘He calls himself Lord Carickbairn ; some of you call him Lord Lackbrain, and some of you call him Lord Crackbrain.’

‘Well, everybody knows that.’

‘Let me have my say. I’m telling you what it has taken me no end of pains to find out. According to the Peerage, he’s a Scotch

peer and a member of Parliament; and his town residence is in Eaton Square; and he's twenty-nine years of age.'

'Rot! He's not more than twenty-five, I'll take my oath!'

'That's what I thought when I first set about making inquiries. To all appearances, the young man has got an unlimited supply of ready money, which he is permitted to chuck about anyhow. Every night of his life he throws a blue and white bouquet, that costs him a couple of guineas, to Miss G.'

Mrs. Redmond knew this also, for the bouquets were her perquisites, and she sold them to the florist the next morning, after carefully taking out the notes, which Nessa never dreamed of looking for.

'I could have told you that,' said Mrs. Redmond, biting her lips, with a newly-inflamed jealousy.

'But you didn't, my dear, so I'm telling

you. Now, do you know the Rev. William Hexham? You ought to, for he's very partial to you.'

'I speak to him now and then. That's all I know.'

'They call him the Muscular Christian here, I find.'

'He's not a parson. It's only a disguise. He's nothing in the world but a private keeper, who looks after Crackbrain, pretending to be his tutor or friend, or something.'

'Just so. But why didn't you say so, then I shouldn't have had to tell you?'

'Well, what's that got to do with us, I should like to know?'

'We may have a good deal to do with him. And I want you to be a little more affable and nice with him, if you can. I want you, in fact, to get him in a line, if you understand me. You see, Lord Carickbairn lives with him in his chambers in Westminster, and he has

control over his lordship, although letting him do pretty much as he pleases. I want you to sound him.'

'He's precious close.'

'I know he is—and suspicious, too. That's why I want you to get at him. Because I can't, safely.'

'What do you want to know?'

'I want you to find out if he ever leaves his lordship alone for a day together. That's all at present.'

'I shall have to know what you are at,' said Mrs. Redmond pointedly.

'Oh, you shall. There's no seerets between partners in business. The very last time I had the pleasure of seeing you, I hear'l his lordship swear that he would marry Miss G. to-morrow, if he had the chance. He told her so in the letters he slips in the bouquets. And he means it.'

'Well?' said Mrs. Redmond interrogatively.

‘What we want is to give him the chance.’

Mrs. Redmond looked at Nichols as if she doubted his sanity ; but he continued, in the same even undertone :

‘While the Rev. William Hexham is about we shan’t get the chance. That’s just why I want you to find if he ever takes a day off.’

‘In order that a girl I hate may marry a lord—a millionaire——’

‘Yes, my dear ; but this young gentleman is something more than that : he’s a——’ He paused, and glanced about him ; and then whispered, in a tone so low that none could hear them but she : ‘He’s a homicidal maniac !’

CHAPTER XXV.

‘ Oh, look here, chummie : here’s a letter for you ! ’ said Mrs. Redmond to Nessa one morning, when they met in the breakfast-room.

Nessa took the letter and examined the outside curiously. She had never seen one like it before. It was particularly small ; the edges were gilt ; there was a coronet in the left-hand corner, with a complicated monogram below, which was in itself as good as a conundrum ; and it was addressed to Miss Viola Dancaster.

‘ There’s no postage stamp. Do you think it’s an advertisement ? ’ she asked.

‘ What a question ! If you had been in

society, you would know better. Don't you see the coronet? It's from some person of title, of course.'

'Oh, I see! The coronet is like the label on a bottle of pickles—without which none are genuine!'

'It's horrid bad form to sneer at the aristocracy,' Mrs. Redmond observed, in a tone of disgust, as if her own position had been assailed.

'Sneer at them!' exclaimed Nessa. 'I couldn't. I love the whole ten thousand, especially when they send me such sweet little letters. How did it come?'

With a pair of scissors she cut the end of the envelope and drew out the enclosure as she spoke.

'I found it in your bouquet.'

'Which?'

'The Blue and White.'

The information was lost upon Nessa, whose

attention was concentrated on the diminutive sheet of crabbed handwriting.

‘It’s an offer of marriage?’ she exclaimed, coming to the end. ‘Hand and fortune,’ she read, going over it again—‘he doesn’t say anything about his heart, and I cannot make out the man’s name. Where did you say it came from?’

‘The Blue and White bouquet; it fell out at my feet.’

‘Then it must be that dreadful young man in the box, who makes such a noodle of himself every night.’

‘I don’t know why you speak disrespectfully of Lord Carickbairn. It isn’t every girl in your position who receives such a compliment from a Scotch peer.’

‘But unfortunately his name doesn’t prevent him being very silly. Every night he is there with his enormous bouquet, and I don’t think I can be accused of encouraging him.’

‘If you came into the canteen like the rest, and weren’t such a touch-me-not young person, he might express himself in some other way. What does he say?’

Nessa handed her the letter. She didn’t know whether to laugh or be serious. In her heart she felt flattered, as most girls do by proofs of admiration, no matter how crazy the admirers show themselves to be.

‘Fancy sending an offer of marriage in a bouquet!’ she murmured.

‘Oh, my dear, I’ve had hundreds of them sent in that way. If I had accepted all the offers—I mean some of the offers—I might have had a title. He implores you to give him an interview. Of course, you will see him.’

‘I shall do nothing of the kind,’ Nessa replied, with quiet dignity.

‘Good gracious me! Why not?’

‘Because I don’t feel that I ought to.’

‘But don’t you see that this letter fixes him? It’s an offer of marriage.’

‘The greater reason for refusing an interview. I don’t intend to marry.’

‘What nonsense! Why, he is a peer, and has ever so much money.’

‘And ever so little brains.’

Mrs. Redmond turned her shoulder impatiently.

‘But even if his wisdom were in proportion to his wealth and position,’ continued Nessa, ‘I would not marry him.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I have not the slightest feeling of love for this gentleman.’

‘That means that you have for some other—some fellow in the company, I suppose?’

Nessa was accustomed to rudeness from this woman; but it was by an effort that she replied quietly:

‘No, I have no love for any gentleman in the company.’

‘Then what difference does it make whether you marry Lord Carickbairn or not?’

‘I should think it would make a great deal of difference to him whether I loved him or not.’

‘Oh, that’s his look-out. He doesn’t ask you to love him ; he asks you to be his wife.’

Nessa made no reply. Silence always exasperated Mrs. Redmond.

‘Look here,’ she said, ‘you’d better think this over. It’s a chance you may not get again. You think it will be all right when you’re twenty-one. “But there’s many a slip—” you know ; and I bet ten to one you’ll never get a penny of your fortune—Redmond will find some means to do you out of it—and then where will you be ? After all, what are you ? A favourite, because you’ve got good teeth and eyes and a decent

figure. But how long are you going to keep your looks, and what will you be when you've lost 'em?—a young woman who got her living by riding in a circus. Why, if a tradesman married you, he'd have to hush that up.'

'I could not have thought of a better reason for not marrying Lord Carickbairn.'

'Oh, bother your stage answers,' said Mrs. Redmond, whose repartee was not of a delicate kind. 'Can't you say plain out what you mean?'

'Yes, I dare say I can if I try,' replied Nessa pleasantly, her good-nature overcoming a sense of irritation. 'I mean this: that when I marry, it will be because I can't help marrying—just from such irresistible impulse as has governed my actions always. When I feel that I must marry, I shall marry; but not till then. Even then I may not be right; but surely it will be better than to do that which I feel must be wrong.'

It would be wrong to take advantage of this offer that has been made me.'

' Why ?'

' What does Lord Carickbairn know of me ? Nothing but what he has seen in the show. He is pleased, like the rest of the crowd, with my eyes and my teeth and my figure, as you say ; but when he sees nothing in me to admire, and recognises me only as a girl who earned her living in a circus, he will be heartily glad that he is not obliged to own me for his wife.'

Mrs. Redmond turned aside with an impatient exclamation.

' But quite apart from that consideration,' continued Nessa, after a moment's reflection, ' and looking at it only from a self-interested point of view, why should I marry him or anyone else ? I don't want a husband. All my heart and soul is in my business. I couldn't be bothered with him. I think that

is why I never feel in love with any single one—because all my feelings are given to so many. I love all the audience, and my sole thought is to win their admiration and receive their homage. It's the passion of my life. I don't want any more money than I get. If I heard that all my fortune was lost—gone for ever—I shouldn't feel one moment's regret, so far as my own loss was concerned. And as for position, I know none in the world that I would change for one generous outburst of applause.'

'That's all very fine for you,' said Mrs. Redmond ; 'but how about me ? You mayn't want money, but I do. You don't seem to remember the sacrifice I've made, and all that I've done, to get you out of the scrape your "irresistible impulse" —she underlined the words with a sneer—'or whatever you like to call it, got you into.'

Nessa was no longer under a delusion with

regard to the sacrifice that had been made for her. She knew the woman, being herself a woman now. She believed still that Mrs. Redmond had saved her life, and in that, but nothing more, she felt indebted to her. For a moment she looked at this coarse, pretentious friend in silence, with something like pity in her face, and then she said, in her low, calm tone :

‘ Yes, I do remember all that you have done for me. But if I married Lord Carickbairn to compensate you for saving my life, you would be my debtor as long as I lived.’

‘ Oh, I shouldn’t feel the debt much more than you do, perhaps,’ replied the lady, turning away with a sniff of contempt, and walking out of the room.

Nessa sat in meditation, with her hands folded in her lap until the door opened, and Mrs. Redmond came in to look for something. The expression of blank unconsciousness in

her face indicated a settled determination for the protracted sulk to which fat, fair women of mean birth seem peculiarly addicted.

‘I have been thinking about what you said,’ said Nessa meditatively, still seated with her hands in her lap by the window, ‘and it seems to me that I have done wrong in neglecting an opportunity of providing for the future, simply because I myself feel no need of money. I ought to have remembered how much your happiness depends upon it.’

Here was a surrender! Mrs. Redmond was so taken by surprise that she could do nothing for a moment. But she forgot all about her sulk, and, in the succeeding flush of exultation, ran to the girl’s side, and caressed her fondly.

‘You dear, unselfish, naughty little chummie!’ she exclaimed, with a kiss between each word; ‘I knew you would see what was square and straight. So you will see Lord Carickbairn?’

‘Oh dear no,’ said Nessa calmly; ‘there is no need to think twice about that. It is my own fortune, not his, that I intend to secure.’

Mrs. Redmond’s caressing hand relaxed, and slipped, inch by inch, from Nessa’s neck as she listened.

‘There is a gentleman—a barrister or a judge, someone very powerful in the law—who made an offer, through Mr. Fergus, to take up my case, and protect my estate from confiscation, if I would accept his services.’ She narrated what had taken place on that occasion.

‘You never said a word about this to me,’ said Mrs. Redmond sharply.

‘No; as I declined to acknowledge that I was Vanessa Grahame, I did not think it worth while to talk about it.’

‘Why did you refuse?’

‘I did not think there was any necessity to

take legal proceedings, for one thing,' Nessa replied. She might have added that one strong reason was a wish to spare Mrs. Redmond the shame of having her husband's villainy made public, but she kept that reason secret with persistent delicacy. 'It seemed to me impossible that I could be robbed of my estate, but now that you tell me it is most probable that I shall lose all, I feel that I ought to avail myself of this gentleman's offer.'

'What could he do ?'

'I suppose he would take action at once against Mr. Redmond for attempting to—to murder me. That, I am afraid, would necessitate your being called as a witness. But your evidence would surely convict him, and secure the estate at once.'

Mrs. Redmond's hand dropped from Nessa's shoulder as if it had been a hand of lead. The prospect of being put into a witness-box to face her husband chilled her to the marrow,

for she knew that he would say : ‘ That woman’s place is here beside me in the dock, for it was she who planned the murder and did the work where my hands failed. She drugged the girl. Let the doctor be called to prove my words.’ The woman was panic-stricken at the idea.

‘ No, no—you mustn’t—you mustn’t do that !’ she cried, dropping in a chair. She dared not look Nessa in the face for fear her own might betray her guilt and complicity in the attempted crime. ‘ You mustn’t do that,’ she repeated, with a faltering voice ; ‘ don’t take any notice of me. I’m upset. I can’t tell you why.’

‘ The reason is clear enough,’ said Nessa kindly ; ‘ Mr. Redmond is still your husband.’

‘ Yes, that’s it—that’s it, dear little chummie,’ the woman said, catching at the excuse gratefully ; ‘ he’s still my husband. I couldn’t give evidence that might ruin him

for ever. You must forget what I said. I exaggerated. He couldn't touch your estate. Promise me you won't speak to that man—the barrister or Fergus or anyone about him. You won't take legal proceedings—promise me.'

'With all my heart I give you the promise. I have said already that, so far as I am concerned, I do not wish to take any steps against him.'

'Thank you! Thank you, chummie!' said Mrs. Redmond humbly, pressing the girl's warm fingers in her cold, clammy hands.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MRS. REDMOND knew that Q.C. well enough by reputation and by sight. She had always feared and disliked him, and instinctively felt that he disliked her. He had a way of piercing her with his eye, with evident enjoyment in the discomfort she experienced. He seemed to be saying to himself, ' You've done something wrong in your time, my friend, and I'd get it out of you in five minutes if I had you under cross-examination ! ' She dreaded him more than ever now, and if peeping through the curtained doors of the canteen she saw him in there, she would abstain from going in. She suspected Nessa of secretly communicating with him. The discovery of

her own complicity in Redmond's crime must always be possible while Nessa lived. The fertile imagination of Mr. Nichols could not have devised a stronger incentive to the fulfilment of his purpose.

Meanwhile, week by week the greedy woman had to deny herself some luxury in order to send the five pounds to her husband. It was now more than ever necessary to keep him out of sight, but she begrudged the money none the less that paid for his retirement. The fear of justice was constantly on her mind ; the necessity of scraping the weekly payment together continually presented itself. The burden every day became more intolerable. And while existence for her was growing unendurable, Nessa was finding fresh pleasures to add to her enjoyment of life. Nothing was wanting to stir up her venomous passion and goad her on to desperation.

A new spectacle was prepared by the ballet-

master, and put up for rehearsal after Christmas. As soon as the holiday audience began to fall off, the hoardings were placarded with new bills :

‘OLYMPIC GAMES.

PRIZE OF ONE HUNDRED POUNDS.

‘A prize of one hundred pounds is offered to any competitor who shall win the prize of Skill and Beauty in

THE OLYMPIC GAMES

at the International. The competition is open to everyone without exception, submitting, of course, to the same regulations observed by the paid members of the International Company.’

This announcement was flanked on each side by scrolls in blue and white—Nessa’s well-known colours—on which were printed in large letters :

‘IRENE WINS !

‘The Company backs Irene (Miss Viola Dancaster) against the whole world, for one hundred pounds at each representation.’

On the first Monday in February the spectacle was produced. Scene-painters and carpenters had been at work for weeks, and during Sunday they had got up cloths and battens which gave to that part of the building occupied by the audience the aspect of a Roman amphitheatre, nearly enough for an entertainment in which anomalies and anachronisms met you at every point. At one end of the auditorium half a dozen private boxes had been cleared away to make room for a flight of steps leading to the benches for the judges, above which rose a chair of gold for the Queen of Skill and Beauty—something of mediæval custom being incorporated into the Greco-Roman medley. A light barrier running

round the whole arena enclosed a narrow space for the Greek audience. The middle was occupied by a raised daïs for wrestling and combats ; the space between this and the barrier was divided into two courses by a circuit of tripods, each eighteen feet high, garlanded together : the outer course for the horses, the inner one for chariots and pedestrians.

At half-past seven every seat in the vast building was taken. Money was turned away at the doors, even for the private boxes. They had been secured by Nessa's admirers and their friends long before, for it was known that something quite novel and original was to be produced.

The show began with the entrance of a dozen sandalled and toga'd attendants with lighted wands, who, passing quickly round the course, lit up the censers on the tripods, which threw up a blue flickering flame with good effect,

the ordinary lights overhead being turned up simultaneously. A venerable gatekeeper, with a heavy bunch of keys, crossed the arena, and seeing the censers lit, slowly opened the arena gates.

With a burst of joyous laughter and delight, the Greek spectators rush into the space reserved for them—men, women, and children, old and young, in all sorts of classical costume—helter-skelter; all eager to get a front place at the barrier, some creeping under and crossing the arena to get vacant places on the other side, a touch of realism being added by a father perching his child on the edge of the boxes behind, and by some bare-legged youngsters climbing up and taking possession of the marble balusters behind the judge's bench.

While the crowd is still streaming in there is a blare of martial music, and the soldiers enter, causing the trespassers on the arena to scuttle off in search of a vacant place, to the loud

mirth and derision of all those who are in the front row. The soldiers are a fine glittering throng, tolerably Greek in appearance, but carrying Roman standards and eagles, and headed by a band whose instruments are unmistakably of the nineteenth century. They are followed by eight chariots, bringing the judges, who, alighting at the steps, ascend to take their places on the benches. They are all equally venerable in the whiteness of their long beards and flowing locks. Then comes the whole stud of horses and ponies, each led by a properly-classical groom, but not mounted. The procession is closed by a motley crowd of gladiators, dancing-girls, javelin-men, wrestlers, and others ; and by the time the last man has entered, the band, having made the tour of the two courses, have taken their places on the raised daïs, and the whole arena is full of glitter and colour. As the march ends, the spectators all round the arena behind the

barrier burst into a hymn. This has a striking effect upon the real audience, who themselves seem to be part and parcel of the show.

Meanwhile, the soldiers, dispersing, take up position at regular intervals amongst the crowd within the barrier, their fixed figures and glittering armour standing out well against the colours of the mob. The hymn is over, and the boys are shoving forward to see what is to come next. The pause is a fitting opportunity for a round of well-earned applause, for rubbish though it may be, it is good rubbish as seen from the uncritical point of view of the ordinary spectator.

The band descends from the daïs, and Fergus enters on his thoroughbred in the correct riding costume of to-day. No entreaties could persuade him to bind his brow with a wreath, and assume the chiton for this occasion. He dismounts and ascends the daïs; he is going to speak, and it is generally believed

that he has to announce that there's a hitch somewhere—Viola Dancaster indisposed, or something of the kind—and everyone listens to catch his words.

He begins by blowing his managerial trumpet modestly, and then informs the audience that certain envious detractors have spread the report that the races run in the International have been 'squared,' and that one of the objects the company had in view in the production of the new spectacle at such an enormous expense was to prove that, though foreign, the company had that English love of fair play which has ever kept our national sports above reproach. (Loud applause from national sportsmen.) He thereupon repeats, in the name of the management, the challenge already published in the newspapers and public announcements offering a cheque of one hundred pounds to any lady not engaged in the company who shall win the prize for skill

and beauty. As none but ladies may compete, it would be taken for granted that all are beautiful, so that the contest resolves itself into a trial of horsemanship. The contest is open to all, subject only to such rules as were provided for the safety of horse and rider. Doubtless among that vast audience many professional ladies have been drawn here by curiosity or a spirit of rivalry. The contest is open to them as to all. Every facility will be given them by the attendants to leave their places and enter the arena, and he concludes by wishing that the best horsewoman may win.

The speech is received with enthusiastic applause, in which he remounts and rides out of the arena. In several parts of the building there is a movement, and it is clear that some 'outsiders' are determined to try for the £100. The excitement grows as the grooms lead out to the steps a string of twenty saddled horses.

A Greek herald mounts the daïs, and, after a flourish of trumpets, delivers the challenge to the crowd of Greeks behind the barrier, who respond vociferously. One after the other girls slip under the barrier, and present themselves as competitors ; they are led up the steps to the judges, who present each with a bunch of coloured ribbon. By the time they have taken their place on the daïs, some ladies from the audience have come down into the arena. There are four of them. They receive favours from the judges ; but instead of going directly to the daïs, they retire to a dressing-room prepared for them, to put on the regulation costume. A chariot race between men fills up the interim ; then the outsiders, coming down into the arena in costume, with their colours, are greeted with a burst of applause, and led to the daïs. Once more the herald delivers his challenge, whereupon a girl in pale blue, bordered with white, who has

hitherto been lost in the crowd, passes under the barrier at the further end of the building, and walks into the arena.

A cry bursts from the crowd, and is echoed by the audience above, as she is recognised.

‘Irene! Irene!’ shout the Greeks. ‘Viola Dancaster—that’s she!’ runs through the audience.

The first race is run by the four outsiders alone; the winner is led up the steps, and seated in the golden chair above the judges. The next race is run by members of the company, and in this Nessa comes in victorious—winning easily by two lengths. And now the prize is to be contested between the two winners—Nessa and the outsider who won the first race. Fresh horses are brought in, and the lady comes down the steps. The band strikes up, and the enthusiastic Greeks strike up a chant in honour of their favourite, the burden being, ‘Our Irene wins.’

The outsider mounts the mare led up to the steps ; then *Espérance* is brought forward, and Irene takes the saddle. There is a discussion before the starting-place, in which Fergus, who has entered the arena for this heat, takes part. What is the matter ? Clearly the outsider is protesting in very vigorous terms. Everyone is straining to catch the meaning of it. ‘She won’t run !’ ‘Look, she’s going to get off !’ ‘There’s some dodge of theirs she’s found out !’ ‘Some precious French trick or other !’ ‘Oh, well, that shows it’s all a put-up thing !’ These are the commentaries heard amongst the audience on every side. Something like a decided hiss of disapprobation succeeds the ominous whispering, when Fergus rides out into the middle, and all are hushed to hear his explanation.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ he says, ‘the lady who won the first race—the champion of the outsiders, as I may call her, although she is a

lady eminent and well known in our profession—refuses to run this heat on the mare provided for her. (Slight applause.) Undoubtedly that mare is inferior to the one allotted to our Miss Viola Dancaster. Unfortunately we have no horse—and it is doubtful if any exists—to match Miss Dancaster's mount. But our Blue and White—our Irene would not be our Irene if she were not as generous as she is plucky—she has offered to change horses and run this race with her rival on the mare her rival has refused, and we, in the interest of fair play, have consented.'

'Irene wins!' shouted an excited young gentleman from his box; and then followed such a burst of applause, as Nessa dismounted and gave up *Espérance* to her rival, that the very place shook to the storm.

There was a fair start, but it became obvious in the first lap that Nessa was to suffer defeat at last. Mrs. Redmond scarcely breathed for

the choking sense of exultation, as she saw the distance widening between the two riders. There was an unusual and ominous silence, as Nessa passed the starting-place on the second lap a length behind. But she never lost courage. The mare she rode was the second best in the stud, and had carried her home in triumph many a time. She hoped to recover the lost ground in the next two laps, and, sparing the whip, cried with cheerful encouragement to her mare. Suddenly it became noticeable that the outsider was losing ground ; and so she was. But it was no fault of hers ; Espérance had heard Nessa's voice behind, and became conscious that she was not in the same hands. As she slackened, her rider applied the whip, and the high-tempered animal, who never felt the whip from Nessa's hand, resenting the treatment, swerved from her course and slackened still more. Only when Nessa's mare was neck

and neck with her in the third lap, and she was fired to her duty by the roaring of the audience, now mad with excitement, she recovered her temper and struck out to win. But it was too late ; they were close to the winning-post, and there was no time to get the pace, and for the first time in her record *Espérance* came in second.

Mrs. Redmond bit her lips through in her vexation, and Fergus himself was astounded. Duprez beckoned him from his box, and a few hurried words were exchanged, as the audience thundered peal after peal of applause.

Fergus once more rode into the middle—hushing the tumult.

He said that, although no member of the company was entitled to take the prize offered, yet the management felt that a race so nobly won called for a signal mark of approbation, irrespective of the winner's position, and he knew that he should be only responding to

the wish of all there in presenting to Miss Danecaster the cheque that had been drawn for a successful rival.

With that he rode across and presented Nessa with the cheque.

Nessa, less conscious of her own triumph than of her rival's defeat, without a moment's hesitation, and absolutely forgetful that she was under the observation of a multitude, turned her horse and put the cheque in the hand of the outsider.

‘It’s yours !’ she said. ‘You’d have won if Espérance had not heard my voice.’

‘By Jove, I’ve heard you are a lady : now I know it !’ cried the woman, who, being a professional, had no false delicacy about taking the gift ; but she knew how to make generous acknowledgment, and, touching Espérance with her heel, she trotted round the ring, holding up the cheque, that all might see the use Nessa had made of it.

Nessa was lifted from her saddle, arrayed in a jewelled robe, crowned with olive, and led to the golden chair, with the band and the throng outvying one the other in her honour.

‘ By God ! she shall be dragged down from that !’ muttered Mrs. Redmond, with a furious imprecation.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE next morning, as Mrs. Redmond was on her way to rehearsal, she met her husband. He stopped her as she was sailing along, her lips pursed up, her nose in the air, and her eyes on the other side of the way.

‘I want to speak to you,’ he said. ‘Oh, that’s no good,’ he added, as she creased her brows and jerked her head significantly over her shoulder. ‘Nessa won’t see us. She went into the show half an hour ago ; and I thought I’d take advantage of the occasion, you know, to drop in and have a chat with you.’

‘I sent you the money on Friday—what else do you want ?’

‘ That’s the very thing I want to talk to you about. Five pounds isn’t enough.’

‘ It’s as much as you’ll get out of me, anyhow.’

‘ Oh no, it isn’t,’ he replied, shaking his head with an incredulous smile.

‘ It’s as much as I can afford—more. I have to pinch and deny myself absolute necessities to get it.’

‘ Oh, that’s all nonsense! You don’t expect me to believe that.’

‘ It’s a matter of indifference to me what you believe or don’t believe.’

‘ Oh, is it?’

The lines about his mouth took a still more unpleasant curve, and his eyes grew narrower.

‘ I’ve seen the paper this morning. Seems to have made a big hit last night.’

‘ There’s some new business to be stuck in; we’re called for eleven, and it’s half-past now. I can’t stop to talk to you.’

‘I’ll walk down to the show with you—not too fast, or we shall have to stop about at the door to finish our conversation. Jolly big hit. What did Nessa get for that bit of business?’

‘Nothing but that cheque she was fool enough to give away.’

‘Rot! It was all a put-up job, of course; but you wouldn’t be fool enough to agree to her giving away the cheque unless she received another in its place.’

‘I tell you she didn’t take a shilling of it. Something was offered, I believe, but she refused it.’

‘Gammon!’

‘Oh, I don’t ask you to believe me.’

‘Thank you—I won’t. I never did; and I’m not likely to begin now.’

It is not pleasant to a liar to be doubted when lying; but when, by accident, telling the truth, it is still more unpleasant. Mrs. Redmond’s feelings were unutterable.

‘I don’t ask you what Nessa gets a week, because I shouldn’t believe you if you told me,’ he continued. ‘But it’s as obvious as the paint on your face that if she draws big houses she draws a big salary. As her manager, you’d look to that.’

‘When we accepted the engagement, I agreed to take four pounds a week for both.’

‘Oh, come: four pounds a week for Viola Dancaster, with you thrown in as a make-weight! You might make a pretence of telling the truth. Four pounds a week!’

‘She was unknown then. I didn’t say that she gets no more now.’

‘Ah, that is what I wanted to get at. Well, you agree that she is drawing a big salary, and that she got a hundred pounds for that business last night.’

‘I tell you she gave it away to

Kitty Lawson — the girl from the other show.'

' Well, stick to it if you like. It only proves what I say. If she can afford to chuck away a hundred pounds, she must have more cash than she knows what to do with. Now, if she gets a lot, it stands to reason you get more. It wouldn't be you if you didn't. The lion's share isn't too good for you—never was—never will be. Now, what I'm coming to is this: if you can let her give a hundred pounds to a girl she never saw before, it stands to reason you can afford to give as much to the man of your choice. And the man of your choice means to have it—d'ye see ?'

The man of her choice would have dropped dead on the spot if her wishes had been effective.

' As I said before, five pounds a week isn't enough for me. I want a cheque for a hun-

dred pounds on Saturday—a cheque on your bankers, my dear.'

'I will take my oath I haven't ten pounds in the world. You needn't expect any more than five pounds, for I haven't got it, and you won't get it.'

'Then I will take my oath you shall see me some time on Sunday.'

'You talk like a fool. I couldn't raise a hundred pounds to save my life.'

'Oh yes, you could,' he said, lowering his voice. 'You could raise a great many hundred pounds if you chose. But you don't choose. You run no risk, and you live very comfortably, and you're putting by a nice little sum every treasury day. You're getting careful and thrifty in your maturity. You're quite content while you can pocket the enormous sums that Nessa is receiving, and don't want anything better. You're like a fat, heavy leech, that get's more lethargic and lumpy whilst

there is blood to be sucked. But that won't do for me. I'm going to put a little salt on your tail and wake you up. You won't get anything more out of Nessa after Sunday unless you give me a fair proportion. Do you understand me, my angel ?'

' Oh, I understand you well enough not to be frightened by your threats. You're not fool enough to cut off your nose to spite your face. You know well enough that if I get no more out of the girl you'll get no more out of me. You won't sacrifice five pounds a week for nothing.'

' No, I shan't. It will be worth five pounds to see you kicked out of the show. It would afford me just as much pleasure to see you out in the cold as I get from your miserable fivers ; and how many more am I likely to get ? Two at the outside, I reckon, if I let things slip on. Look at that girl's success. Why, there was a string of bouquets all round the course after

her business last night, I'm told. It would be a paying concern to have such a girl for a wife if she had no expectations. But it's got about somehow that she's heiress to a big estate. You've been fool enough to blab, I dare say. Anyhow, it's known who she is—Nichols heard it in the canteen. It will be in the papers soon; they grab at every bit of news about the popular favourite, and she'll be nailed by some fellow for a certainty. It's the fashion now for swells to marry professionals. Some sucking lord will get hold of her, and she'll be the pet of society, like Mrs. Thingamebob. But the family lawyer will look after her estate and sift her affairs. Then what will become of you? Well, you may think yourself lucky if they leave you alone. That's the best you can hope for. But look out for squalls, my sweet creature, if you dare to make yourself known to Nessa or any of her husband's lot when she's married.

Why, they'd pay me handsomely to let 'em know what sort of a friend you are to the girl ; and, by George ! I'll let 'em know if you force me to come and see you next Sunday. I'll sell you if I can't do better—I give you fair warning, mind : I'll sell you to the enemy. Nichols gave you a hint, and you haven't chosen to act on it. Now, I've given you a hint on my own account, and if you don't take it, so much the worse for you. Ta-ta !

Mrs. Redmond had a shrewd suspicion that this hint came from Nichols also. It was too masterly for her husband. She saw that their motive was to stir her up to immediate and decided action ; but she was convinced that Redmond's threat was not an idle one, because the interest of Nichols and himself were threatened by delay. She saw, as well as they, that among Nessa's admirers there were many who, from cupidity, or a less mercenary fascination, would gladly offer her marriage.

The woman scarcely needed stirring up. Her own devilish inclinations prompted her to take desperate measures for the destruction of the girl. The will to do murder was ever present; the means alone were needed. Her torpid imagination had no object but the accomplishment of that one desire. A sense of her own impotency added to her exasperation. The thread of life was so slight, even in the strongest man, that a touch could break it; yet she was powerless to put an end to this girl.

She was well read in criminal history, and knew the particulars of every murder that had attracted public attention within the past ten years. From the newspaper reports she had learnt the surest ways of killing. She knew the exact places in the human body where the life could be tapped—where a knife could be buried, or a razor drawn, or a bullet fired with fatal effect. For a few pence she could buy

drugs to poison a whole family. There was no difficulty about that. With two substances to be bought separately, without a question, at any druggist's shop, she could distil in an ordinary oil-flask prussic acid by the pint. Poison almost as deadly was to be had at the hair-dressers', the grocers', the general shops—anywhere, despite all Acts of Parliament. It wasn't want of knowledge that hindered her, but the fact that she knew too much. For she had learnt in the course of her reading that in nearly every case of poisoning the poisoner is found out. That frightened her. She remembered the narrow escape she had from being openly convicted of administering chloral to Nessa at Grahame Towers. And yet she clung tenaciously to the idea of discovering some method of poisoning Nessa safely—with the infatuation of an ignorant inventor to solve the problem of perpetual motion. She could not see that the problem

was insolvable—that she, with a very inefficient intelligence, was attempting a task that has baffled the highest ingenuity of scientific criminals in seeking the means of taking human life with impunity. She had actually tried an experiment in the art of murder. Taking a hint from the novelist, she had attempted to suffocate the girl by laying a wet cloth over her face. It was a signal failure. Nessa had woken out of a sound sleep as soon as her lungs failed to get their due supply of air, compelling Mrs. Redmond to snatch off the cloth and decamp for safety. She liked the idea of strangling the girl with a cord in her sleep, and setting fire to her by overturning a lamp; but she dreaded the examination that must follow at the inquest, and the evidence of the doctor, who might have some test to prove that she was killed by strangulation, and not by suffocation from smoke. Then she turned her mind to killing

with the fumes of charcoal in the French way. It would be easy to introduce a pan of the stuff lighted into her room when she slept, but, unfortunately, the girl obstinately insisted on having the window open at the top.

It seemed as if Satan himself would not have her for his minister.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE rehearsal had begun when Mrs. Redmond trotted into the arena from the stables. She was always behind time. Four two-horse chariots were taking the outer course; the ring-master on his horse keeping pace with them in the inner course, shouting instructions as he went. Fergus stood on the daïs. Nessa, with eight or ten girls mounted, waited near him in the course below. Mrs. Redmond crossed the outer course and joined them as soon as the chariots had passed.

The chariots were driven by women. This was an innovation; ordinarily they were driven by men. Mrs. Redmond turned her

head in contempt as she noticed the feeble way in which they handled the reins.

‘It goes all right, Waring, doesn’t it?’ asked Fergus of the ring-master as the chariots drew up.

‘Oh yes! they’ll manage it well enough by the end of the week.’

‘I can’t do it, Mr. Fergus,’ said one of the charioteers. ‘I must decline, if you please; I’m afraid of the gas standards.’

‘Quite right to say so, Miss Melville. It’s a dangerous job, I know. And I warn you all it’ll be more trying when the tripods are lit. Will any lady volunteer to take Miss Melville’s work?’ Fergus turned to the group of equestriennes, adding, ‘Of course we cannot spare you for the work, Miss Dancaster.’

There was no response.

‘Surely there must be some amongst you who can drive a pair.’ He fixed his eyes upon Mrs. Redmond, who he knew was as

clever a driver as she was a rider. 'The idea is this,' he continued for her benefit, knowing she had only just come in. 'When the horse-race is run, the chariots are brought in, and the herald invites lady competitors. You come in from the crowd in the usual way, and the race is run on the outer course. The winner then takes her chariot into the inner course, while the winner of the preceding race takes the outer course—horse against chariot. There will be but one rider and one chariot, and you'll have the whole course to yourselves, and then take the laps as close as you like. I need not say that the rider, as usual, will have to be careful with the tripods, but the chariot can verge the daïs all the way round—no fear of upsetting that. Of course, if chariot wins, chariot will take the prize. Now, then, there's a chance for you: who volunteers?'

Mrs. Redmond looked straight before her as if she had not heard a word.

‘Surly brute !’ muttered Fergus between his teeth. Then, as none of the girls offered to take Miss Melville’s place, he said, ‘Well, Miss Melville, as no one seems to have the pluck or the kindness to come forward on your behalf, I must ask you to do your best for to-night. There’s no nonsense about you, and you can keep behind. No one will notice it except myself, and I shall not forget your service. I promise you that if you don’t like it after to-night, I’ll find another for the business to-morrow. May I ask you to oblige me ?’

‘Oh, I’ll do it to oblige you, Mr. Fergus. I don’t mind coming in last.’

‘There’s a good girl. Now then, Waring, chariots round again, if you please. Take it a bit quicker, ladies, and the first in will then do a heat with Miss Dancaster to see what start may be given. Tail off, Miss Melville, when you get to the top.’

‘Further out, further out!’ called Waring, galloping along the inner course as the chariots neared the top.

Fergus watched with anxiety.

Mrs. Redmond put her horse forward, taking suddenly an eager interest in the heat.

The chariot just managed to escape collision with the tripod, and that was all; but at the bottom they came to grief, despite the ring-master’s warning, the innermost chariot fouling one of the tripods, and throwing the other chariots into confusion. Fergus tilted his hat over his eyes and scratched the back of his head as Waring set the charioteers right and brought them round.

‘You *must* keep away from those confounded standards!’ he called out, tilting his hat back impatiently. ‘Why will you keep all of a lump at the turns? Make your running in between, but do, for Heaven’s sake, take the top and bottom wide. I’ll have it

over again, and you must keep at it till the thing goes right.'

To the surprise of everybody, Mrs. Redmond called out :

' Give me a hand down, Fergus ; I'll tool one of the dust-carts round.'

Fergus helped her down, and without taking off her skirt she took Miss Melville's place in the last chariot, bringing the frightened and restive horses under control in masterly fashion. She took the inside of the row at the start, and kept the others in their places to the finish, for she was not less feared than disliked by the girls, and not one dared to press upon her at the turns. She won, of course, by a couple of lengths.

' There's no fear now,' said Waring, as he trotted up to Fergus. ' One word from that woman is worth a week's shouting from me. They give her a wide berth, and she knows how to keep it. A cool, strong

hand ; she can do what she likes with the horses.'

Nevertheless, Fergus had the business repeated thrice before he dismissed the other chariots. Then Mrs. Redmond and Nessa ran a heat : the chariot in the inner course ; the horse in the outer. This seemed to most of the onlookers a mere matter of form—to test their relative powers. There was not the slightest danger, each having an unimpeded course, and Mrs. Redmond's interests keeping her as close in to the dais as possible. Only Fergus saw that the woman was terribly in earnest.

As it was a trial of pace to decide what start should be given to the chariot, Nessa honestly put her mare to her best ; Mrs. Redmond, on the other hand, kept a tight rein ; but, notwithstanding, Nessa only got in a length in advance, the difference in the radius being so much against her. Fergus,

who detected the unfairness on the part of Mrs. Redmond, grudgingly decided that she was to have the start of a length at night, but he gave Nessa a word of warning as he helped her down from the saddle.

‘My dear, you’ll have to do better than ever to-night. That woman means to win. The trial wasn’t fair, for she was pulling all through. You can’t afford to be too generous, and must take the turns a little closer. You can do that without danger, and you must win for the sake of my reputation as well as your own.’

‘Thank you for telling me. I will do my very best. I could keep closer in.’

‘Then do. Every inch out makes a difference—a foot out means a length in the three laps.’

Nessa’s unselfishness was not so complete as to reconcile her to the prospect of defeat by Mrs. Redmond. It had seemed so natural

to her to win that since her first success she had never contemplated the possibility of losing. Such a possibility terrified her now as she realized how much of this wonderful happiness she enjoyed was due to her success. She felt that she should lose all that made her life so dear if she were not to receive the applause of the audience, not to be invested with that glittering robe, and be led to that gilt chair above the white wigs of the judges. It would break her heart to go out with the crowd of girls who had lost, and be pitied instead of envied.

Fergus himself was uneasy about it. From a business point of view, it might not be a bad thing for Nessa to lose a race now and then, but this consideration was overruled by the strong liking he had for the girl and friendly sympathy with her. In the evening, shortly before the call, he went upstairs and knocked at her door. She had now a dressing-room to

herself. After a couple of minutes, Nessa came out to him in the corridor, dressed for her first entrance.

‘Just ran up to see how you are getting on,’ he said carelessly, but glancing anxiously at her face. Then something unusual and unlooked for in it fixing his attention, he added : ‘Why, you’ve got colour on for the first time ; what’s that for ?’

‘That they shan’t see what I feel when I’m beaten,’ she answered in a tone so dull, so unlike herself, that it silenced her honest friend for a moment.

‘Oh, nonsense ! You’re not going to be beaten,’ he said presently.

‘Yes, I am. I shall lose to-night. I feel quite sure of it.’

‘If you do I shall know that it’s my fault. You want courage at such a time as this, and I’ve just gone and taken it all away.’

‘No. You won’t find me wanting in courage—but I shall lose all the same.’

‘You know I may have been wrong. She may not have pulled her horses.’

‘She did. I am sure of that too; for she has not come home to-day. She has been afraid to face me.’

‘You’re wrong again there. She went out to lunch with a fellow (catch her refusing!) Who would be afraid to face you, I should like to know?’

‘You would if you were doing me an intended injury. I’m not an angel. You don’t know how wicked this has made me feel towards her.’

‘I’ll cut this confounded business out altogether.’

‘No, I will not consent to that. You may think me a coward; she never shall.’

She spoke with such firmness and dignity

that Fergus saw the uselessness of attempting to alter her decision.

Just then the call-boy ran up the stairs.

‘The overture, miss,’ he said, and hurried to the general dressing-rooms.

‘I’ve kept my eye on the mare. She’s in fine form. I suppose I can’t do anything for you?’ Fergus said, offering his hand.

‘No,’ said she, as she gave hers. ‘Only please don’t come to me when it’s all over. Let me get over it by myself.’

They parted—Fergus relieving his dejection by cursing Mrs. Redmond from the bottom of his heart, and himself as well for not openly accusing the woman of foul play and denying her any advantage in the start.

Nessa was glad to enter unnoticed amongst the crowd. It seemed to her that the building was more densely packed than ever, that more had come to witness her failure than had been attracted by her successes. Some of the

supers, recognising her, offered to give her a place at the front of the barrier ; but she declined it. For the first time she dreaded the moment when all eyes should be turned upon her. It came at last ; as soon as she slipped under the barrier and stepped out in the arena, she was recognised by the expectant audience. Her name was on every lip, everyone had heard of her generous gift to the unsuccessful rival ; all looked for some new and extraordinary evidence of her daring and address. Never had she received such prolonged and enthusiastic applause. Yet it failed to chase away the settled gloom from her mind ; the presentiment of disaster hung over her like a black, impenetrable cloud. Mrs. Redmond kept her distance, and never once dared to meet Nessa's eyes.

A groom, coming to Nessa's side, said in an undertone :

‘ Mr. Fergus says, will you have Caprice for

the first race, and keep *Espérance* fresh for the final heat?

Nessa assented to this arrangement. It was almost a matter of indifference to her whether she lost the first race or the last, as she was to be beaten.

There were half a dozen competitors from the audience to-night. The races were run as on the preceding night. The outsiders' heat was won by an Italian woman; Nessa won in the 'International Company' heat. When the two horses were brought in for the race between the two winners, Nessa gracefully offered the choice to her adversary. After taking in the animals' 'points' with a keen, shrewd glance, the Italian chose *Caprice*. Nessa won on the other by a length and a half. Nessa was once more triumphant, and as she trotted round the arena a line of bouquets marked her course.

Fergus had arranged that the robes of

victory and the triumphal chair were to be taken after the chariot race ; but just at the last moment he had changed his instructions, with the hope of inspiring Nessa for the last effort. So to Nessa's surprise and Mrs. Redmond's expressed disgust, on having returned to the steps where she started, Nessa was lifted from her horse, clad with the tinselled robe, and led up to the chair, the collected bouquets being placed at her feet and the steps leading to it. Nessa was glad to sit there, but she felt that it was for the last time.

The chariots were brought in, and the challenge given to the women beyond the barriers. Mrs. Redmond was the last to offer. Her victory was a foregone conclusion—the race was a feeble one, and yet she won by no more than the length of her chariot. Nessa and Fergus knew that she was reserving her horse's strength for the single contest. Once more the herald challenged the crowd to

compete with the charioteer. A note from Fergus slipped into her hand had prepared Nessa for her business. When the herald had given the challenge three times and no one from the crowd responded, Nessa rose, upon which there was a tumult of applause from company and audience. She came down from the throne amidst the flowers that covered the steps, and put off her wreath and robes. Then Espérance was led in. She patted the mare's neck, looked round the house once more, and mounted. In dead silence Mrs. Redmond brought her chariot to the starting line on the inner course ; then a length was measured, and Nessa brought her mare to the mark. Fergus whispered a word of encouragement as he passed her, and the next minute the signal to start was given.

Before they had gone half-way down the first lap, Nessa perceived that Mrs. Redmond was putting her horses to their utmost speed.

She knew they never could keep up the pace, and so made up her mind to reserve her mare for the final lap. In the second lap Mrs. Redmond was far ahead, but Nessa and Fergus both saw that her horses were almost spent with the tremendous effort exacted from them, and that there was yet a good chance for *Espérance*.

‘Now !’ cried Fergus, as Nessa darted past, entering on the last lap.

‘Now, now ! my dear mare !’ cried Nessa.

Up to this moment Mrs. Redmond had stuck close to the daïs, taking all the advantage possible of the inner course ; but now, with a cry of bravado, she drove away to the outer limits of the course, as if in contempt to give her rival a chance. The manœuvre was seen by the audience and raised some applause from those who admired the audacity ; but, before the hands had ceased to clap, a wild scream rose from the whole audience. The

chariot-wheel had caught in the leg of a tripod at the lower end of the arena, and had swung the horses right round and flung them down across the outer course, and in the next instant Nessa's mare, kept close in to the standards, and going at the very top of her speed, dashed into the floundering horses of the chariot.

It had happened in such a brief space of time that few actually saw what occurred ; but as *Espérance* limped across the arena with an empty saddle, it was known that *Blue and White* had come to grief at last.

She lay motionless on the tan. The colour was still on her face, but a thin stream of blood flowed from the corner of her lips, and when Fergus raised her shoulders her head fell back, and her half-closed eyes were already glazed.

‘By heaven !’ he exclaimed, ‘that *Jezebel* has killed her !’

CHAPTER XXIX.

As Nessa recovered consciousness, she heard the roll of drums and the strident outburst of brass, opening the triumphal march, to which, the night before, she had been led to her place of honour, followed by a thunder of applause that drowned the music. But it came from a distance, that music, like the sounds in a dream, and the stamping of feet and clapping of hands came from above, and she was bewildered with a strange sense of immobility and pain. What had happened ? Had she fallen asleep ? Was the spectacle really being played without her ? Where were the lights, and the serried rows of spectators who applauded ! It must be so—she

had fallen asleep! For now, her eyes opening, she saw a whitened ceiling, a gas-jet flaring in its wire protector, quite blurred and indistinct, but yet sufficiently clear for her to know that she was in one of the anterooms of the arena.

‘Oh, I shall be late!’ she cried in terror. ‘They can’t do without me. I am called——’ Then she stopped abruptly. Something choked her, leaving an inky taste in her mouth.

There were voices close to her. She recognised the voice of Fergus, as he said, in a tone of fervent gratitude: ‘Thank Heaven, she lives!’

‘You must not speak. Lie still. Be calm,’ said a voice, low and soft, in firm, measured tones, that commanded obedience.

Who was it spoke? She blinked her eyes to clear them of the film that obscured her sight. There was a circle of men about her, and one kneeling by her side, who pressed a

sponge to the lower corner of her mouth, as he held her head in the hollow of his arm. She did not know the man ; he was not one of the company. He had a close-clipped beard. It was still a continuation of the dream. But the music rising now, as the applause subsided, reminded her of the part she should be playing.

‘I must go !’ she murmured, in plaintive appeal. ‘I ought to be on the steps. Don’t you hear them——’

She stopped again, for, as she struggled to raise herself, a terrible pang shot through her body, while a fresh rising of blood from her throat sickened her, and made her giddy and utterly helpless.

The cold sweat was wiped tenderly from her brow, while the same low voice said :

‘ You have been thrown from your horse and hurt. You must not try to move.’

Then it all came back to her : the arena,

the open course before her, the chariot ahead in the inner course, the voice of Fergus, as she rushed past, crying: 'Now, now!' the effrontery of Mrs. Redmond, sure of victory, taking the outer edge of the course to add to her triumph, and almost in the same moment, as she was putting *Espérance* to her full speed, the sweeping round of the chariot right across her course and not a length in advance, the fall of her mare, a terrible blow from one of the hoofs of the chariot horses, that seemed to break her body in two, and the fading away of that awful shriek which rose from the audience.

She wondered what injury it was she had received. At every breath she felt that pain shoot through her body. What was the meaning of the blood that flowed into her mouth, hot and nauseating—of the cold sweat that chilled her? Was she dying? Was it nearly over—the short life, so full of

triumph and joy ? Or was she only maimed and crushed—disfigured and crippled for ever, never again to hear the shouts of applause and receive the homage of admiring throngs ? Oh ! better die now than live on to remember a joy which could never return !

As these memories and speculations ran through her mind, she lay quite still, with her eyes closed, as if the eternal sleep was stealing upon her. The doctor's sponge had taken the colour off her cheek ; her pallor, her stillness, the waxen set of her features, looked so like death, that a significant glance was exchanged between one and another of the speechless men who surrounded her. And yet there was no visible sign of fatal injury, except the thin line of blood that crept from the corner of her half-closed mouth. Almost as colourless as she, Fergus bent down, and, unable to control his feelings, murmured, in a faltering, imploring voice :

‘It’s all right, my poor girl, isn’t it?’

She made no answer; she had not the strength to open her eyes, but there was suffering in her face, and pain contracted her pretty brows.

In horrible contrast with the silence of the grief-stricken group, a strain of lively music came in a sudden burst through an opening door, and the audience in the gallery above renewed their applause at some incident in the arena.

A tear ran down Nessa’s cheek, and her lip quivered.

‘They have forgotten me already,’ she said, with a faint sob.

The doctor raised his hand warningly, as Fergus was about to speak, for he had reason to fear that the slightest excitement might produce fatal hæmorrhage. Even at that moment a fresh round of applause caused the stricken girl to writhe, involun-

tarily, under the smart of ingratitude, and a sharp cry of pain was choked by a renewed flow of blood from the ruptured lung.

It seemed to Nessa, in her delirium, that the thankless, cruel crowd was stamping upon her poor, crushed body.

‘What have I done? What have I done to harm you, that you should so ill-treat me?’ she thought, attempting to stretch out her arms in an appeal for mercy to those she had loved, and who had once loved her. The pain at her heart was more than she could bear, and all became dark and confused with the fading away of consciousness.

* * * * *

One morning she awoke to find herself lying in a strange bedroom. She could not make it out at all. There were two windows facing the foot of her bed. The blinds were down, but the sun was bright upon them. It must be quite late, yet she felt very tired and

sleepy—so sleepy, that she dozed off in the vain attempt to recollect whether there was a rehearsal to attend to-day. Presently she woke again. Where was she? Clearly it was not her own room. It was much too neat and orderly for that, she reflected, with a painful consciousness that she had been getting more and more untidy and careless of late. There were French hangings to the bed, with a crisp, frilled edging. The window-curtains were draped prettily—not at all like her own, which were allowed to hang anyhow. Everything seemed in its place, reminding her of the precision maintained in the old school-days at Eagle House. Only here everything was so pretty and tasteful, which could not be said of the appointments at Mrs. Vic's. No; she had left school long ago; but where was she now? She felt she must be very thick-headed not to know.

To be sure! She was an equestrienne at

the International. ‘Blue and White wins!’—and she was Blue and White. If she could only get her head a little clearer, she would be able to make out exactly where she was. She turned, with the resolution of waking up thoroughly, and settling the question that perplexed her; but at the first movement a dull pain in her side brought back a flood of recollections, that for the moment took away all power of reasoning—of breathing almost.

Gradually her ideas grouped themselves into two distinct pictures—the arena, with the chariot sweeping round the course; and the anteroom, with its whitened walls and ceiling, and flaring gas, and the circle of silent, awe-stricken men about her.

She knew that her body was injured. She felt that it was encased in a rigid corset of some kind; and furtively she raised her arm, not without difficulty, to her face, with a horrible fear of finding that also crushed and

disfigured. Slight as the movement was, it attracted the attention of her nurse, who sat near one of the windows, a little beyond Nessa's range of vision, reading. She came to the bedside—a young lady, not more than twenty-six, Nessa thought, tall and thin, dressed with a simplicity that would have been severe on anyone less gentle than she looked. While Nessa, with her hand still upon her cheek, looked up, making these few mental notes, her nurse scanned her face with anxiety; then, with a flush of pleasure, she said:

‘The doctor said you would wake this morning, and you are awake, dear. Your eyes are clear and steadfast. But you are parched with thirst, aren't you?’

Nessa moved her head affirmatively.

‘I have something ready for you. Don't rise,’ said the nurse, taking a glass from the adjacent table, and bending down beside Nessa. ‘See, you can drink easily through

this tube. You must let us treat you like a little child for just a few days more.'

Nessa felt like a little child—weak and powerless, and willing to yield. She drank eagerly, and, feeling refreshed by it, looked up again gratefully into the kind face that was already fascinating her. They were dark, compassionate eyes—the beautiful feature in a face that had nothing else but its sweet expression to admire.

Then Nessa's curiosity revived, and she asked, in a feeble voice :

‘ Where am I ? Not in a hospital—no ?

‘ No—in my rooms. And who am I ? you want to know : well, I am Grace Arnold.’

‘ I don't know you. I can't remember your name in the programme—Grace Arnold—there are so many of us.’

‘ I am not in your company, dear,’ said Miss Arnold, laughing. ‘ They wouldn't have me. Look at me.’

She drew herself up, turning her face to the light, that Nessa might see her. She was too thin, her teeth were irregular, her face was long, and her beauty, if she had any, not at all of the type found at the International ; but Nessa thought that she looked more lovable than anyone she had ever known.

‘ And if one is not very pretty,’ continued Miss Arnold, ‘ one must be clever, and I am neither. No, dear ; I am nothing but Grace Arnold yet awhile.’

Something in the look of her face and the expression in those two last words seemed to indicate that she was ambitious of being something more.

‘ Where is Mrs. Redmond ? Why am I in your house ?’ Nessa asked.

‘ You needed attentive nursing—more than Mrs. Redmond could possibly give, and Mr. Fergus did not wish you to be taken to a hospital, so Mr. Meredith was good enough

to bring you to me, knowing that I have nothing to do, and that I am fond of nursing.'

'Who is Mr. Meredith?'

Miss Arnold's face flushed, and she seemed to find a difficulty in choosing words for her reply.

'He is a doctor, dear; very wise and very kind, and good and thoughtful. He was at Olympia when your accident happened, and, happily, he was able to be of great service to you. He knew what to do, and what surgeon to send for, though I don't believe any can be cleverer than he, and I think you owe your life to him, dear.'

'Am I—am I very much injured?' Nessa asked falteringly.

'It was a very grave accident. A bone was crushed inward—there, at your side. And then you were taken with fever, and for many, many days you have been unconscious, lying like one in a troubled sleep. But he said you would wake to-day, and

you have, and all the danger is past, and you will get well again quickly, if——'

She stopped abruptly, for Nessa had caught sight of her own hand lying on the coverlet, and was now looking at it aghast as she held it up to the light.

‘Look, look !’ said she, hardly above a whisper ; ‘this is not my hand !’

Miss Arnold cast a swift glance at her face, fearing that the excitement of talking had produced a return of the delirium.

‘Yes, dear, it is your hand,’ said Miss Arnold, taking it gently in her own. ‘You can feel mine, can’t you ?’

‘But there is nothing of it. I could see my bones through the skin. Bring me a glass, bring me a glass !’ cried Nessa, with terrible anxiety.

Miss Arnold saw that the best thing she could do was to comply, and quickly brought a hand-glass, which she herself held before Nessa’s face. The girl looked in awe and

wonder at her shrunken face, terrified by the wildness in her own eyes, and then, pushing the glass away, burst into tears.

It was all over : her beauty was quite gone —colour and form, all gone! Nothing but two great eyes there, that stood out like some monstrous caricature. They would never take her back at the International. It was all over. She felt Miss Arnold's soft fingers passing tenderly over her head, heard her sympathetic voice murmuring hopefully ; but she could not take comfort. It was too terrible to think that all the joy of life was lost, and she could think of nothing else. She fell asleep when her grief was exhausted, but her train of thought was unbroken ; only when she awoke it seemed to her that she had realized her position, and brought her mind to reason calmly on her condition.

‘ I shall have to make up like the other girls now,’ thought she ; ‘ then perhaps they won’t

take me back. It wasn't my fault; Mr. Fergus must have seen that. But I don't suppose he will trust me to ride *Espérance* again, especially now I look such a dreadful scarecrow of a girl. They won't want me. I dare say they've got somebody else in my place —someone just as pretty and daring as I was.'

A light murmur of voices at the bedside caused her to open her eyes. A gentleman was standing beside Miss Arnold, who seemed to be talking about her. At first Nessa thought that he must be Dr. Meredith; but this opinion was shaken by his appearance. He did not look like a doctor—certainly not like the wise, benevolent, white-haired, elderly gentleman she had figured from Miss Arnold's words. This gentleman was young—not more than thirty or thirty-two—tall and straight, broad-shouldered and deep-chested, with short, close-curling hair, a beard trimmed to a point, and a long, fair moustache. He wore a gray

jacket, and a flannel shirt with a turn-down collar that showed his sunburnt neck ; and his silk handkerchief was tied carelessly in a loose knot. In one hand he held a pot of lilies of the valley ; the other hand rested on Miss Arnold's shoulder, as he listened attentively to what she said. It was more probable that he was herbro ther, by his manner, and, like her, had no fixed occupation. Still listening, he turned his head towards the bed, and, seeing Nessa awake, smiled, and nodded cheerfully. Now Nessa decided that he could not be her brother, for his eyes were a clear blue, and his complexion good, and every feature regular, and wonderfully handsome, in Nessa's opinion. Perhaps he was Miss Arnold's lover, and if he were, Nessa thought that they were well matched, for both looked so honest and good.

‘ These are for you, dear,’ said he, giving the pot of flowers to Miss Arnold ; and then he came close to the bed, and taking up

Nessa's hand, he held her pulse lightly under his fingers, while he fixed his eyes on her face, his own taking an expression of gravity that won Nessa's admiration and respect.

'Are you Dr. Meredith?' she asked.

He nodded, still holding her hand; and then a smile breaking over his face, he said:

'You'll do now, Miss Dancaster. It has been no end of a tough contest this time, but you've won again. I shall have good news for your friends to-day.'

'My friends,' said Nessa faintly; 'oh! they have all forgotten me.'

'Forgotten you!' exclaimed the young doctor, with a laugh. 'Hand me that thing off the table, Grace.'

Miss Arnold brought an ornamental basket from the table.

'Look at these!' he continued, taking up a handful of cards, and letting them slip through his fingers back into the basket. 'That will

show if your friends have forgotten you. We've had to muffle the door-knocker, they came in such numbers. Look at them !' stirring the cards with his finger. 'Here are friends by the dozen, and some with capital good names, too. What do you think of that ?' He held up a card with a crest and monogram, which Nessa recognised as Lord Carickbairn's.

'But I remember, as I lay there after the accident, hearing the people applaud over my head, as if they had already ceased to care for me.'

'Ah, that has been running through your mind ever since, and we've tried in vain to undeceive you. Now, thank Heaven ! we can make it clear to you. The applause you heard was intended for you, and no one else. You see, your accident created something like a panic in the audience, and, to keep them quiet in their seats, Fergus had the presence of

mind, the moment you were carried out, to get a young lady as nearly like you as he could, and send her in upon a chariot, with the robes that you were to have put on as victor, you know. He told the girl to cover her face as much as possible, and the charioteer to drive round to the steps as sharp as he could. In that way he deceived the major part of the audience, who thought you had simply fainted in the arena, and been brought to outside. Thanks to the size of the building and the girl's cleverness in keeping her face well concealed, scarcely one in a hundred of the audience saw through the deception. It was only when the papers came out the next morning that the truth was known. And now you see that the audience was not the heartless monster you have been talking about all through your long sickness.'

‘Oh, I am glad to hear that!’ Nessa murmured.

‘ And I am glad to set your mind at ease ; for you can’t get well and strong with a nightmare like that haunting you. Now, is there anything else you wish explained—any question you would like me to answer ? If so, out with it at once, because, you see, when we get your mental faculties into calm working order —and they can’t work calmly while you are harassed with doubts and dread—so that you can govern your actions, and lie still, we can do without this uncomfortable waistcoat, and give your body a better chance of recovering strength.’

Nessa thought for a minute, and then she asked :

‘ Was the poor mare hurt ?’

‘ Yes ; I think she was sprained badly. I will ask about her to-night.’

‘ Thank you ; I was so fond of her. Is Mr. Fergus very angry with me ?’

‘ With you ! I should think not. He’s cut

up a good deal, for he knows he was partly to blame.'

' He does not think it was my fault ?'

' How could he ? You were not three yards behind when the chariot fouled the tripod. No one on earth could have avoided collision under such conditions. Be quite at ease upon that point. There is no misconception as to the cause of your accident ; and if there were, Fergus would be the last in the world to entertain it. He's an honest, good fellow that, and I'm sure your sincere friend at heart, though I hold that he ought never to have allowed such a race to be run.'

' Then you think he will take me back ?'

' He'll be only too glad—when you get strong and well enough, you know.'

Nessa gave a little sigh ; then, holding up her wasted hand, she said, in a pathetic tone of self-commiseration :

' I shan't be always like this, shall I ?'

The doctor laughed ; but the laugh could not conceal the pity he felt for the poor girl.

‘ Why, of course you won’t,’ he said. ‘ You’ve been starved for nearly three weeks, and it is but natural that you have grown thin and pale. But now you will eat, and make flesh, and the colour will come back to your face.’

‘ My friends wouldn’t know me now.’

‘ We will put them to the test soon, I hope.’

‘ Soon—yes,’ she replied eagerly, ‘ but not yet awhile—not till I look nice again. That will be soon ?’

He answered her appeal with a cheerful nod.

‘ When shall I look well enough to go back again ?’

‘ You may look well enough before you are able to sit in the saddle.’

‘But I *shall* be able to ride again—not at once, but some day. Oh, do tell me that! I could not live if I thought I should never—never be anything but this. I am not so much injured—see;’ she moved, and then bit her lip to conceal the pang it gave her.

‘That won’t do, my child; you must lie quite still. I can only promise recovery on that condition.’

‘I will do whatever you tell me—nothing without your consent. I will obey you as if I were indeed your child. Tell me what I shall do now.’

‘This is famous,’ said the doctor cheerfully, rising from the chair in which he had seated himself. ‘I’ll give you my first ordinance, for we have talked quite enough, and you must sleep if you can. Shut your eyes, and think of the very dearest friend you have, with a confident belief that there are happy days coming.’

She moved her head in assent, with a smile,

and closed her eyes ; then she tried to think who was her very dearest friend, but she could see none but the honest, kind face of the young doctor ; and with that before her she fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXX.

WHEN the chariot struck the tripod, it seemed to the general spectators that Mrs. Redmond had been thrown out; but in reality her fall was intentional, and she suffered nothing by the collision. When she rose from the arena, and, staggering across the course, clung to the barrier for support, she was indeed nearer fainting than ever she had been in her life; but it was from the terror inspired in her guilty conscience by her own act—the fear that her intention had been detected, and that she would be made to suffer for it. As she glanced at Nessa lying motionless under the feet of the plunging horses, she had no doubt that her murderous purpose was effected; but

the only remorse she felt was that she had chosen that means of killing her. As the supers beyond the barrier pressed forward to get a view of Nessa, she noticed that not one of them said 'She is dead,' but all exclaimed that she was *killed*. If they said that, it was because they knew she had purposely thrown her chariot across the course.

Sick with fear, she crept under the barrier and tottered to the exit. One or two of the men, seeing her pass, glanced towards her, muttering under their breath with significant nods ; but no one attempted to stop her. In her unreasoning state of apprehension that surprised her. As she was making her way up the stairs to the dressing-room, pressing her hand to the wall for support, a couple of the dressers, who had heard the scream of the audience, and were coming down to find out the cause, stopped and asked if anything had happened to her. She had no power to

reply, but, muttering something inaudibly between her chattering teeth, she pointed down towards the arena and continued her way.

But one idea possessed her—flight! In the dressing-room she huddled on her clothes, wound a woollen wrap, such as the French girls used, over her head and round her throat so as to conceal her features as much as possible, and got out of the building. She passed several groups of men gathered about some member of the company who had seen the accident, and escaped almost unobserved, certainly unrecognised. It was only when she was outside, and at the moment when she was congratulating herself on her escape, that a hand was laid on her arm. With a start and a cry of terror she turned to find that the man who arrested her was the money-lender, Nichols.

‘ You’ve done it !’ he said in a low tone.

‘Done what?’ she gasped, glancing to the right and left to see if they were observed.

‘Murdered her,’ he replied in a whisper. ‘Come on, my dear; don’t stand here. There’s a policeman at the corner, and you have not got a moment to lose.’

He hurried her across the road, holding her arm, and led her along the dark side of the street opposite.

‘Why, you’re trembling like a leaf, I do declare!’ he continued in a low tone. ‘Have they tried to arrest you already?’

She attempted a feeble defence, fearing treachery on his part, doubtful whence the avenging blow would come.

‘Arrest me?’ she faltered. ‘What for? It was an accident.’

‘You stupid woman—oh, you very stupid woman! What a pity! Such a fine woman, too—such a wonderful lot of pluck, and yet so stupid. You go and do a stupid thing, and

then you're stupid enough to think your friends are going to believe you when you tell a stupid story. I knew you were going to do for the girl when you left me. I said to myself, "That little Grahame won't be alive this day week," I said. And I had a kind of presentiment you wouldn't be able to take time over it and do it thoughtfully and nice. Something or other made me think it would happen to-night, and I couldn't keep away from the show. It was a sort of fascination—just like what a friend of mine told me he felt in seeing a regular tamer go into a cage of lions. He was sure the lions would kill the tamer one day, and he was obliged to go to that show every time there was a performance, until one day sure enough the lions did kill the tamer. There, that's just how I felt. Only when I paid my money down I said to myself, "Well, I shan't have to go to this expense long." I felt sure of it. I did, upon my word.'

The sound of the Jew's oily voice and lisp, flowing smooth and low in her ear, made the woman's gorge rise, but she was constrained to listen.

'But why did you do it like that, my poor woman?' he continued. 'Why did you do what thousands of people would swear to—the outsiders—people as know nothing about circus business: to go slap out of your way and run up against a post that any fool who had never touched the reins could keep clear of? I know what your idea was: you wanted to make believe you were showing off, and that you caused the accident by carrying your showing off a bit too far. Well, that might get you off if the company would support you. But they won't. They don't like you; they are all against you. They worshipped little Grahame, and they'll all swear you did it out of jealousy. All London would be on their side if it was only a question of professional

jealousy. But it's something more than that. Your real danger is much worse than that—oh, much worse !'

'What do you mean ?' she asked, thrilled with a fresh terror.

'Why, when the prosecution examine your antecedents, just think what a case it will be. You aren't stupid enough to think that they will believe in your *alias*, are you now ? Of course not. You know, as well as I do, that they will find out who you are, and I ask you what jury is likely to let you off when it's known that your husband will come into £50,000 by the death of the girl, and that you are mad with jealousy of her rise in the profession ? Why, public opinion wouldn't let you escape. Stupid woman ! Stupid woman ! If you'd only taken your time and done it cleverly, how nice and comfortable you might have been for the rest of your life !'

She stopped, leaning against some iron

railings, with her chin sunk on her breast ; suddenly goaded to desperation by a sense of her own folly, she turned upon Nichols :

‘ It was you who put me on to this. If I am convicted, by God ! you shall go with me. I’ll tell all. You shan’t escape if I don’t.’

‘ No, my dear, but you will escape. If I wanted you to be convicted, I shouldn’t have given myself the trouble to come round and find you. For your own sake you’ll save yourself and keep a quiet tongue. Now what do you think of doing ?

She collapsed again, and merely shook her head in reply to Nichols’ question.

‘ I’ll tell what you shall do, my dear lady. You shall go in and get your money and pack up all you want to save in one box. When that’s done I’ll take you home with me. My wife will be delighted to see you. And to-morrow morning you shall take the boat and go to my wife’s mother at Hamburg. She

will take care of you and make you comfortable till the affair has blown over. While you keep out of the way, there can't be any inquiry as to who you are, and in a few weeks the police will cease to inquire after you. Then, when your husband has come into the property, you can just come back, present your little bill, and get your money—I'll see to that—and there you are, a perfect lady for the rest of your life. Now, ain't I a real good friend to you, my dear ?

Within twenty-four hours Mrs. Redmond and her baggage were in Hamburg.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ONE day when Nessa had so far recovered that she could sit up in bed with a little help, and even change her position without pain, she awoke out of her afternoon sleep to find a stranger seated at her bedside in the place usually occupied by Miss Arnold. The stranger was a stout, motherly old lady, with a cap and French curls of white, silvery hair, a fresh complexion, a good-natured expression, and a pair of spectacles resting on the tip of her nose. She was knitting, and her lips were firmly compressed, giving a certain character of decision to the lower part of her face, in protest to the lines about the eyes, which denoted a tendency to

mirth and laxity. A soft white kerchief round her throat, fastened with an antique miniature brooch, set round with pearls, and a black silk dress, showed that she was by no means a common sort of person, even if her face and French curls had not proved the fact.

After taking half a dozen stitches, she glanced round at Nessa, and seeing the girl's eyes wide open, and fixed upon her, her lips expanded and her eyes puckered up in a kindly smile as she nodded and said :

‘Good-afternoon, my dear.’

‘Good-afternoon,’ said Nessa.

‘Now, I dare say you wonder who I am, and how I came here, and all the rest of it,’ said the old lady, laying down her work and taking off her spectacles, with her eyes very tightly screwed up. ‘Well, my name is Blount—and blunt’s my nature!’ She shook her curls and assumed an expression that seemed to

say, 'Do not make a mistake and think I'm an easy - going, soft - speaking old woman.' 'And I've come here to take care of you while Miss Grace gets a little rest and exercise and fresh air. And now, first of all, what do you want, my dear ?'

'Nothing, thank you.'

'Then let me turn your pillow. Don't be afraid. I've had children of my own, and nussed 'em through many a sickness ; and if my heart is a little bit tough, my hand is tender enough. Now, how's that, lovey ?'

'Oh, that is very comfortable indeed, thank you.'

The old lady gave a little nod of approval as she stood with her hands folded before her ample person, looking down on Nessa.

'You have a very pretty voice, and I'm glad to see that you have very pretty manners also,' she said, with a certain degree of patronage in her tone. 'Now, would you

like me to go on with my knitting, or would you like me to talk to you? I would offer to read something, but my sight is getting uncommon short.'

'If you could knit and talk at the same time,' suggested Nessa.

'That's a very sensible idea,' said the old lady, screwing up her eyes again to put on her glasses. 'Do you know, I'm most agree'bly surprised in you,' she added, turning her face to Nessa as she adjusted her needles. 'I know what you were, you know.' She raised her knitting and shook her curls as a warning that she was about to be extremely blunt. 'You were a horse-rider in a sukkus, for my dear boy, Mr. Sweyn, told me so, though I could hardly believe it when I see you asleep; and it's harder now I see your nice, honest eyes open, and hear your voice, and see how prettily you behave yourself; and if they hadn't told me who never yet deceived me,

even when I nussed 'em as children—and children are little rogues, bless their hearts!—there, I never could have believed that you were anything but a regular young lady, born and bred.'

'Don't you think a rider in a circus may be a lady?'

'Well, they may, my dear; but in general I don't think they are. I was nuss in a nobleman's family for eighteen years, and all my life I've lived in the very best society; but I never yet knew any young lady show herself off in short frocks and jump through paper hoops and carry on Meg's diversions of that kind.'

'But I didn't wear short frocks or jump through hoops.'

'Then I'm heartily glad to hear it, for I can't think it becoming to young persons at your time of life. My gracious! I think it would kill me to see my dear gal, Miss

Grace, a-standing on one leg with a frock of that kind !'

The idea of Miss Arnold in this condition almost frightened Nessa.

' Ah, she's an angel, she is,' pursued the old lady, with a slow shake of the head over her knitting ; ' and I suppose we ought to be grateful she is such ; but I can't help wishing at times that she would go a-pleasurin', like other young ladies, and take a little more care of herself. Has she told you of this new scheme of hers, my dear ?' lowering her voice to a discreet undertone.

' Not yet,' Nessa said.

' No more she has me. She's one of those who don't like to be praised, or even to let people know of the good they do. It's something to do with young women like you—nussing, or something—I don't know exactly ; but, anyhow, it means that she's going to give her time and her fortune to doing good to

others. Well, she can't spend her money better, I suppose, than in such work; but I do hope she won't sacrifice health and happiness as well. A dearer gal never lived—nor a sweeter, nor a prettier, to my mind; and it do seem a pity—though I suppose I ought not to say so—that she can't be content to marry, and have a nice large family, and servants, and gardens, and all the pleasures of life. How is she to keep her husband comfortable, and look after her dear little children when they come, and enjoy herself going to operas, and Crystal Palaces, and waxworks, and the South of France in the winter, if she's got all these'—Mrs. Blount hesitated a moment between the dictates of high principle and womanly feeling, and then, letting the latter take its sway, she added, in a tone of deep exasperation—‘these horrid hospitals and things on her mind?’

‘Miss Arnold is engaged to Dr. Meredith,

isn't she ? Nessa asked, with a pardonable curiosity in that subject which will render the most prudent young lady indiscreet.

Mrs. Blount turned round and nodded vigorously, with a significant wink and a beaming smile.

‘ Yes, my dear,’ she said in a confidential whisper ; ‘ you may say they've been engaged ever since they left off pinafores. They're bound to marry ; and it's high time they were, for my boy, Mr. Sweyn—I call him my boy because I nussed him when he was a babe ; and so I did my dear Miss Grace likewise, the families being related, you understand—well, Sweyn is thirty-two, and Grace is seven-and-twenty come May ; and so, as I say, it's high time they married. But, you see, she is very rich, and he is very poor, his practice bringing him in next to nothing, and I suppose he would like to feel a little easier before he marries. For he's a rare manly fellow, as you

must have seen ; and I think it would fret him to keep up a position suitable to his wife's bringing up that he would have to pay for with some of her money. There ! that, I think, is the secret of his standing off so long. Though there's no nonsense about him, you know, lovey. He's been to sea as a surgeon, and that makes a man manly. Still, he's got his delicate feelings, being as well born and bred as any gentleman in England. However, it will come all right in the end, I'll be bound ; and I warrant it will be the saving and making of my dear gal, Miss Grace. For though he is a doctor, and appears to agree with all your new-fangled notions about women going out to these lepers, and Prim-rose Leagues, and one thing and 'nother, I don't believe when they're married that he'll hold with his wife sitting up all night in a hospital and leaving him to take care of the baby. And you may be sure of this, my

ducky, that if he don't like it she won't do it. If a husband is strong and manly, as he ought to be, and a wife is loving and wise, as she ought to be, not all the woman's rights that ever sent a parcel of poor old things wrong will ever take her from her fireside if he's minded to sit down there and be comfortable. But, there !'

'I fear Miss Arnold has been sacrificing herself for me,' said Nessa, after a pause.

'She has, my dear,' replied Mrs. Blount, with a most decided nod. 'She's knocked herself up for your sake. I warrant you've never found her away from your side when you've needed her. No. Night and day she has watched over you ; and she wouldn't have gone away this afternoon if I hadn't come ; and not then if you had been in any danger.'

'Why?' asked Nessa, wondering. 'She did not know me. She doesn't know me now.

I might be the most undeserving creature in the world.'

' That wouldn't make a pin of difference to her ; except that I believe she would care more tenderly for you if she thought all the world despised you—bless her dear heart ! ' The old lady's voice trembled, and, laying down her knitting, she raised her glasses and wiped away a tear. ' It isn't a craze with her. She's not one of those poor miserable creatures in an everlasting fidget about their souls— who do right because it's a duty. Her goodness comes natural, and is owing to nothing but the loving-kindness of her heart ; and there's not a bit of fear or selfishness in it—that there ain't.'

With these words Mrs. Blount took her knitting, and, picking up a stitch, went on in her confidential and less emotional tone.

' She's not strong, you know, my dear, bodily ; it's her untiring spirit that keeps

her up, and leads her on to do things she ought never to attempt. Why, bless you ! she'd never have sent for me to help her, but just kept watching you day and night till she dropped, if Mr. Sweyn had not seen that she was overdoing it. He wrote to me telling me all about it—for I live at Brixton, which is a tidy way off ; and you may be sure I didn't take long to consider how I should answer his letter. Off I came by the very first tram, and now I am here I mean to stay till you don't want any more nussing.'

‘Oh, I hope Miss Arnold is not ill,’ said Nessa, reproaching herself for not having noticed any change in her friend’s appearance.

‘She’s not ill, dear. I should hope Mr. Sweyn loves her too well to let it come to such a pass as that. But she would have worked herself ill if he had let her. She isn’t ill. She won’t allow that she is fatigued

even, though the glass would show her that by her paleness and the dark lines under her eyes. She only needs rest, fresh air, and change, and that she can get now I'm here. They're gone for a drive together, and I assure you she looked better the very moment she got out of doors, and wonderful pretty too, with her fine eyes sparkling and happiness in her face as she sat beside that fine, big, handsome boy of mine, as I must call him. And, between you and me, lovey, going out with her sweetheart, and having him all to herself, will do her just as much good as the fresh air and the exercise.'

'I am very glad of that. It must make one feel very happy to have the dearest friend in the world all to one's self.'

'To be sure it does ; and it makes even an old woman like me happy to see two nice, healthy, young people sweetheating honestly, too. And now, as I look at you with that

sadness in your face, I shouldn't wonder if you're pining for some handsome young gentleman.'

'No,' said Nessa quietly.

'Sure-ly you've got a sweetheart, dearie. I mean one that you like better than all the rest.'

'No. There is not one that I care for more than another. Not one that I care for at all in that way—as Miss Arnold cares for Dr. Meredith, for example.'

'Then you ought to have, my dear,' said Mrs. Blount emphatically. 'What have you been thinking about?'

'Why, I suppose I have been thinking very much about something else,' Nessa answered with a smile, thinking of the passionate delight she found in the arena. But the smile died away quickly, and a heavy load seemed to press upon her heart.

'I must not think of that,' she said to her-

self, attributing the depression to a before-felt premonition that she should never return to the International. Still that weight lay upon her heart when she turned her thoughts to her friends, Grace Arnold and Sweyn Meredith, and pictured them together in the sunshine, happy in their mutual love.

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